

gods and monsters by Iolaire02

Series: [lucky number \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, M/M

Language: English

Characters: Barbara "Barb" Holland, Billy Hargrove, Carol Perkins, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Kali Prasad | Eight, Max Mayfield, Nancy Wheeler, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Steve Harrington, The Party (Stranger Things), Tommy Hagan

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Steve Harrington & Nancy Wheeler, Tommy Hagan & Steve Harrington & Carol Perkins, background Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, brief Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler

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Summary:

They say that seven is a lucky number, but Steve has never felt particularly fortunate.

1. Hermes

Summary for the Chapter:

Hermes is... a divine trickster, and the god of roads...

Notes for the Chapter:

Steve has powers! And although he has powers, this is (supposed to be) more character-based than plot-based; his powers don't have a major role.

Eight is in the Rainbow Room today.

Seven can't remember the last time he saw her there; he especially can't remember the last time he saw her there without her portly overseer lurking just outside the door. She looks as though she got there long before him, and her impatience is etched on her face, but that is par for the course. Eight scowls at him, and Seven looks over at Nonna, who – despite looking even older than Eleven's Papa (and now that Seven thinks about it, it has been a long time since he last saw either Eleven or her Papa – even longer than it's been since the last time he saw Eight), with her long, silver hair – is not much taller than him, with a questioning glance.

Nonna holds a slender, wrinkled finger up to her equally wrinkled mouth, and Seven nods, wide-eyed, and presses his lips together cooperatively.

"How are you doing, Eight?" Nonna asks softly.

Eight nods succinctly; Seven notices that blood has begun trickling from her left nostril. He wonders what she's doing but knows better than to ask; Nonna had told him to be silent, after all.

"Alright," Nonna says, "follow me."

Seven reaches up to grab her hand and follows her out of the Rainbow Room with Eight following right behind them. Seven looks

over his shoulder and notices Eight's overseer – he thinks he might've heard Nonna call him Ray, once, but he doesn't really know; he doesn't know much about Eight's overseer, other than the fact that she doesn't much like him – standing a few doors down from the Rainbow Room, acting as though he cannot see them.

Maybe he can't, Seven muses; he knows that Eight can get inside people's heads and make them see things. The last time Seven and Eight were in the Rainbow Room together, she had shown him Eleven being taken away; he had tried to find her, Eight matching his every footprint as they scoured the halls for any sign of their lost sister. Seven thinks that maybe that is why he and Eight haven't been in the Rainbow Room together – haven't seen much of each other at all, really – since.

Eight must be making it so that she and Seven and Nonna aren't visible to the various personnel wandering the halls, but even Seven knows about the cameras. They are hard to miss, black and clunky against the expressionless white walls; Seven thinks that he's seen them move from side to side before, as though they're *watching* everything that's going on, but they aren't moving now. In fact, now that Seven thinks about it, the cameras are all droopy, like they're looking down at the ground, and the lights are all off.

Seven looks back at Eight; the blood from her nose is coating her lips, now, and more is beginning to trickle from her ears. She looks tired, and she's starting to lag. He tugs on Nonna's hand, trying to get her attention. She looks back at him, and he points to Eight. Nonna's eyes widen in recognition, and uses her free hand to point at Seven, raising a questioning eyebrow, like: *Can you help?*

Seven nods and reaches back to wrap his fingers around Eight's wrist. He does it carefully, so that he doesn't break her concentration, and feeds her some energy so that she can keep holding up her illusion.

Energy transference is not Seven's strong suit; he can do it, in a pinch, but his talents lie elsewhere, just as Eight is far more adept at creating illusions than using her empathy. Either way, though, Nonna has helped him learn to use this particular skill set well enough that Seven can *help*, and so Seven feeds Eight energy through his skin – he feels it seep out of him, a trickle at first, as he flexes the muscles, that

quickly swirls out of him in a manner reminiscent of the torrential rains Nonna would sometimes let him watch through a hidden, high up window – and watches Eight walk a little straighter; she seems more focused, now, and less like she'll drop her illusion and pass out at any moment.

Seven smiles against the itch of the blood that slips, whisper soft, down from his nose; it is better that he bleeds than Eight, who is their ticket out of here, who is his and Nonna's and her own path toward the big glass doors that lead outside, to sprawling concrete walkways and dark, winding roads, and, eventually, or so Nonna has told him many times before, to grassy green fields and sky-piercing trees and freedom.

Finally, *finally*, they're out. It's a good thing, too; Seven can feel the exhaustion creeping up on him, and he isn't sure how much longer he'll be able to keep feeding Eight energy, which, by association, means that Eight's ability to keep holding her illusion will only last a little longer than he does.

Seven chances another glance over his shoulder; Eight is still right behind him and Nonna, and she nods at him a second before the lights in the lab flip on. He stops feeding her his energy, thankful that she doesn't need it at the moment, and wipes his nose. Nonna pulls them forward, and Seven and Eight stumble after her until they come to a row of white vans with blue lettering.

Nonna opens the door, and Eight clammers inside first, Seven right behind her. They slump against each other, exhausted, and Seven hardly notices when the van starts moving.

When Seven wakes up to Nonna's hand on his arm, shaking him gently, they are no longer moving.

"Come on, Seven," she says. "It's time to get up."

Seven sits up groggily, nudging Eight as he does so. Nonna hands each of them a stack of clothing, and Seven quickly strips out of the loose gown that he wore back at the lab and squirms into the blue pants and striped shirt Nonna had provided; out of the corner of his

eye, Seven notices Eight doing the same.

They slide out of the van and follow after Nonna as she walks briskly towards the mouth of the alley that she parked the van in. Seven and Eight rush forward to catch up with her: she grabs their hands so that they are flanking her, and they step out of the alleyway onto the busy street, where they slip into the throngs of people who can camouflage them.

They walk for what feels like forever; every now and then, Nonna threads her way through the crowds, dragging Seven and Eight behind her, and they slip out onto another crowded street and blend in with another group of people.

Seven can't stop looking around himself; there is so much to see here: there are tall buildings, adorned with windows, which scrape the sky; there are colorful cars with sleek curves lining the streets; there are people everywhere, some who look like him, others who look like Eight, some who look like Nonna, and some who look nothing like any of them at all. Seven thinks that – after the white-washed walls and cold, fluorescent lights and expressionless faces he grew up with – this is the best thing he's ever seen.

He looks over to Eight, wondering if this is the best thing she's ever seen, too, but her politely disinterested face reminds Seven that, unlike him, Eight lived out in the world before coming to the lab. He thinks he remembers Eight showing him where she lived before she was taken, thinks that maybe the reason *this* isn't the best thing she's seen is because she remembers seeing things that are far more impressive.

Seven thinks that maybe the lab messed up with Eight; he thinks it's better to have a child from the beginning, like Nonna's told him they did with him. Unlike Eight, Seven can't remember what the world looks like; he can't remember his parents, or his name, or anything other than the lab and the siblings it gave him and the heartless overseers and scientists who walked its corridors.

Seven thinks that if he could remember the world like Eight, he'd have been furious that he and the world were stolen away from each other and locked away on opposite sides of a box whose windows

were little more than a cruel taunt, like: *Do you remember this? Do you see all the things that you love but cannot have?*

He thinks that it is no wonder that Eight is angry all the time.

He wonders, when he sees the coldly calculating expression on her face as she takes in their surroundings like she's memorizing them, what Eight will do now that she is free. They are siblings by circumstance, but there is no doubt in Seven's mind that he feels that bond far more strongly than Eight does; it was Eleven – the diminutive child with more power in her pinky than Seven or Eight had in their hands, the waifish little girl who needed protecting, the tiny whisp of a thing that Eight looked at and saw herself in – who held Eight's loyalty, not Seven.

Seven doesn't think he holds anybody's loyalty, except maybe Nonna's, but he is almost never sure about her.

Eight catches him looking and holds a finger to her lips like Nonna did when she released them from the Rainbow Room. Seven presses his lips together and swallows down the sadness that wells in his throat; he thinks that maybe Eight is tuned in to him right now, that maybe she can feel it, because she flicks her eyes away from him after a moment, leaving Seven to drop his gaze to the pale gray of the sidewalk beneath him.

Nonna drags Seven and Eight behind her until the sun starts to sink behind the buildings, staining their edges red and gold even as their faces fade into dark silhouettes. When it is almost pitch black, save for the lamps lighting the streets, Nonna stops in front of a dilapidated old house that looks as though it has been crammed thoughtlessly between the buildings on either side of it. They slip inside, and Nonna leads them into a cozy room, where Seven and Eight curl up on big, fluffy chairs.

Nonna sits opposite them and lays out her plan. "Now that we're away from the lab," she begins in her soft voice, "we will have to name you two something else. Now, Eight, I know you are old enough to remember your old name, so if you'd like to use it, you may."

Something like a smile crosses Eight's face. "I would like to be called Kali again," she says softly.

Nonna nods in acknowledgment. "Now, Seven, I never saw your file, so I don't know what your name was; we'll figure something out for you, okay?"

Seven nods, feeling exhaustion start to creep up on him.

"Once we've figured out names," Nonna continues, yawning, "we'll use the money my mother left us to hide so that no one will know who we were. I want you to be able to spend the rest of your lives growing up like normal children do. I'm sorry I didn't get you out sooner."

Eight – *Kali* – looks on with sharp, bright eyes. She sniffs, her nose twitching as she does so, and says, "It is okay. You are the reason we got out at all. That must count for something."

"Thank you," Nonna says, offering them an apologetic smile before she dozes off. Seven turns to Kali, whose breathing has evened out; her face is softer than Seven has ever seen it, and something about it – and the change in location – relaxes him enough that he drops off quickly and sleeps deeper than he ever did in the lab.

He never sleeps that deeply again; when he wakes up in the morning with warm, golden rays of the sun streaming through the windows and pooling onto his face, Kali is gone.

She never comes back, and it hurts.

2. Philotes

Summary for the Chapter:

In Greek mythology, Philotes / 'filətɪ:z/ (Greek: Φιλότης) was a minor goddess or spirit (daimones) personifying affection [and] friendship...

Nonna and Seven play an elaborate game of pretend, and everyone they meet is part of it.

Two years after Kali leaves, they go back to Hawkins, back to the same town that houses the lab, and they *live* there, right under the noses of everybody they've managed to run away from. It's really something, to taunt and mock people who don't even know that they're the butt of the joke.

So, they're back in Hawkins, and they move into the old Harrington house – Nonna tells him that the house was one of the many facets of the impressive fortune that Nicholas Harrington willed to her mother, all of which her mother willed to her when she died back in seventy-four – and he introduces himself as Steve Harrington to anyone who asks.

So he is Steve Harrington, son to obscenely rich, extremely absent parents – so absent, in fact, that no one in Hawkins has ever seen them. (So absent – if absent means *nonexistent* – that no one ever will.) In their place is Nonna Elda, little Steve Harrington's doting nanny.

The funny thing about this game he and Elda are playing, Steve thinks, years later, is that it never took much to integrate themselves into this tiny town. All it took was Steve's big, big eyes, and his friendly smile, and a little nudge with his voice, and an oddly timed bloody nose that he was quick to wipe on his sleeve; all it took was a *suggestion*, and because Steve's got such *charm*, such *charisma*, everyone just... accepted it.

Seven is ten when he finally becomes a real, full-blown person with a background as fake as the masks people wear when they go out every day. Steve Harrington is eleven when he becomes the king of an entire town with just a few words.

After that first year in Hawkins, though, Steve doesn't *persuade* anyone about anything – without permission – for a long, long time.

He doesn't have to, when he's *already* king.

There is a massive tree right on the edge of the Harrington property. It's also on the edge of their closest neighbor's property, but Steve doesn't care about that, just like he doesn't care that his house is situated on a large piece of land that's surrounded by several large trees. The one on the edge farthest from the pool is the tallest one. It's his best chance at touching the sky.

Steve hasn't climbed many trees before, but he knows it's best to find the lowest branch and start from there. He thinks it's best to start from the bottom for a lot of things, but especially trees. Unfortunately, the lowest tree branch is at an awkward height; it's a bit above his head, a bit out of his reach, and he can't jump high enough to grab it and wrap himself around it and shimmy onto it. He frowns at the tree, unreasonably irritated that it is so blatantly flouting his plans.

"Whatchya doin'?" a voice from behind him asks, and Steve turns abruptly. Facing him is a boy about his height and age, with dark hair and greenish-brown eyes and lots of freckles.

"M trying to climb this tree," Steve replies, pointing up at the green foliage above them.

The boy frowns at him. "This is *my* tree. It's in my family's yard."

"Well it's in my yard, too," Steve argues, "so I get at least half of the tree."

"I suppose so," the boy frowns, "but it doesn't seem like much fun to only have half a tree, does it? The lowest branch is on my side, so

you won't be able to get up, but some of the better climbing branches are on your side, so I won't be able to go to the top."

"Then we'll just have to share," Steve says, nodding firmly, like he has the authority to decide such things.

The boy looks at him suspiciously before shrugging. "Sure. We can share. D'you wanna be friends?"

Steve gives him a narrow-eyed look. "S'pose so," he mutters, pretending as though this boy won't be his first friend ever. "I'm Steve," he adds after a brief pause.

"I'm Tommy," Tommy offers, grinning. "Hey, will you gimme a boost to the branch? I'll pull you up after."

Steve grins back at Tommy helplessly, and crouches down with his hands cupped. Tommy steps into his foot and, after a moment, squirms on to the lowest branch. He wraps his legs around it, locking his ankles tightly, and reaches down to help Steve up.

They sit side by side on the lowest branch for a while; Steve thinks that Tommy is a little bit surprising: he seems like the type of boy who needs to talk constantly in a bid to fill up the silence around them, but here he is, having just offered to be Steve's (first!) friend, just sitting beside him on the lowest branch of the tree they share, not talking. He's just sitting, appreciating the world around them.

Steve thinks that Tommy is pretty great, really.

They go their separate ways a few hours later, after they've struggled their way part way up the tree and all the way back down, jumping from the lowest branch to the ground in an abrupt motion that feels – for a split second – almost like flying.

At eight thirty the next morning, Steve hears a knock at the front door; when he opens it, Tommy is standing right outside, his grin splitting his face in half as he asks Steve if he wants to bike into town. Steve, who has only just managed to get the hang of biking, says yes.

Before they head out, Elda presses some money into his hand. Steve

shoves it into his pocket, gives her a hug, and rushes out the door. Tommy is already on his bike at the end of the driveway, and as soon as Steve pulls up beside him, they're off, biking through the streets, laughing as they race each other up and down hills, through intersections, over the corners of curbs.

When Steve gets back home, having hurtled past Tommy's driveway, hoping to reach his own before his friend made it into his house, the money Elda had given him is still in his pocket, and Steve is the happiest he's ever been.

Tommy and Steve have been friends for nearly a month when school starts up.

Steve has been out of the lab for just over two years, acclimatizing to the world and catching up on the schooling he's missed, and Elda has finally decided that he can go to a real school. He's been excited about it since they moved to Hawkins; he's eleven, now, and even Elda agrees that it would be good for him to have friends.

Tommy tells him that it's lucky that he moved to Hawkins when he did – he's starting school as a middle schooler, which is *much* cooler than an elementary schooler, and he's new to town, and rich, which – according to Tommy – automatically makes him cool. Tommy is convinced that everyone will love Steve, and Steve thinks that maybe he believes him.

On the first day of school, Steve learns that being new is only cool if you're also rich and – if the giggling girls in his class and in the halls are to be believed, and Tommy assures him that they are – cute. He learns this because there is another new kid. She's newer than him, even, and Steve hears – from various people before it's even ten o'clock – that she moved from New York City just last week, which is glamorous. “Or,” Tina Macmillan tells him in an obnoxious whisper, “it would be, except the new girl isn't all that pretty – not like you,” Tina giggles when Steve frowns at her, “– and she doesn't have much money, either, because she lives down Old Cherry Lane.”

Steve wants to point out that plenty of their classmates live down Old Cherry, but Tina seems like she's the kind of person who talks more

than she listens, and, anyway, both she and Steve live in Loch Nora, only a few houses away from each other, so he doesn't really have a leg to stand on.

So he hears about the new girl, but she isn't in any of his morning classes – Tommy tells him in third period English that her name is Carol, but that he hasn't seen her yet either – and so he has to wait until lunch to form any *actual* impressions.

By the time he gets to lunch, Steve is somehow the most popular person in the room. He's not really sure why – he's just been minding his business, swapping jokes with Tommy whenever they find a moment together, and trying to pay attention to his teachers – but everyone seems to want to talk to him, or sit with him, and Steve is feeling a little overwhelmed by the time he catches Tommy's eye.

Tommy waves him over, and Steve goes, because it kinda seems like Tommy's the only normal person in this town, or at least he's the only one worth spending any time around, because Steve's known Tommy for a month now, and never once has he been as obnoxious and shallow and overwhelming as literally everyone else in the sixth grade. Steve hasn't met any seventh or eighth graders yet, because the only mixed-year class for sixth graders is gym, but he hopes they'll be better than the kids his age.

"Toldja they'd love you," Tommy says, giving Steve's shoulder a soft punch as soon as he's close enough."

"You didn't say that their love would be so soul-sucking," Steve mutters petulantly, scowling half-heartedly at his friend.

Tommy laughs. "I said they'd love you, not that you'd love them. And anyways, no one said you have to hang out with them; you just need them to like you, because it's better to be liked and admired than bullied and made fun of. Now, we're going to use your new-found popularity and my continuing popularity to do a good deed, okay Stevie?"

"Okay," Steve shrugs, following Tommy as he leads the way to one of the cafeteria tables. "What're we doing?"

“I had fourth period math with Carol Perkins,” Tommy tells him, seemingly out of the blue. After a month, though, Steve knows that Tommy’s going somewhere with this – he doesn’t *need* to talk to fill the silence, but once he gets going, he tends to provide more details than expected before getting to the point.

Steve has learned that it’s best to let Tommy say what he wants to say; Steve had only asked him to get to the point once, but the hurt look Tommy had sent him, as though he thought Steve didn’t care about what he had to say, had Steve vowing to himself to never do it again. “Mr Hoss put everyone in alphabetical order, and Carol and I ended up in the back of the classroom. So, I’m bad at math, right?” Tommy pauses long enough for Steve to nod – Tommy has told him many, many times before how terrible he is at math; Steve had told him about his dyslexia, feeling as though they were keeping a secret for each other, like in the books Elda read to him sometimes.

“Carol isn’t.” Tommy announces. “Carol is super smart, I guess, and she helped me with the math problems, and she’s really cool, Steve. And she’s new, so she has no friends because everyone wants to be your friend because you’re, like, cool and new and rich and cute or something, and so I thought that if no one’s gonna be friends with Carol, who’s basically super awesome, why shouldn’t we. We shouldn’t have to miss out just because people are stupid.”

“Okay,” Steve agrees, “but how is this using our popularity for a good deed?”

“Because we’re untouchable, Stevie. Us being friends with Carol will be good for her because everyone loves us, y’know? Besides, you’ve heard how people are talking about her. I just think it sucks that they’re accepting of some people but not others, you know?” He shrugs. “We’re just making sure that she doesn’t have a tough time at school is all, and it’ll be cool to have another friend, too. Look,” he adds, pointing to a table with only one occupant, “there she is.”

Steve and Tommy sit beside Carol, who has frizzy reddish-brown hair and huge, plastic-framed glasses. She’s cute enough, even if she doesn’t have the perfectly coiffed hair the other sixth grade girls have. She’s painfully quiet at first, but when she finally opens up, Steve is pleased to discover that she’s got quite a lot to say.

Through a mouth full of food, Tommy insists that both Steve and Carol come to his house to work on homework after school, and Carol, wide-eyed and startled and blushing a little, agrees a breath after Steve does. The three of them eat their lunches together, talking when something comes to mind, and sitting quietly when nothing does. It's comfortable, and Steve thinks that Tommy's got an eye for people – he remembers the mangy dogs and bony, starving cats that wandered the streets at night back in Indianapolis; he thinks Tommy is maybe in the same habit of picking up strays with potential as Elda always was.

After lunch, Steve has science class with Carol and Tommy, and Mr Clarke lets them sit together, even though *Perkins* isn't even in the same ballpark as *Hagan* and *Harrington*.

It seems like, after that, everyone expects Tommy and Steve and Carol to go everywhere together. Carol tells them that some of the girls she shares her classes with stared talking to her after they saw her eating lunch with the boys and sitting with them in the classes they shared. Steve decides that Tommy was right: no one's really bothering them about being friends with Carol; Steve wonders what it is that does it – is it that he and Tommy have money, or because the two of them are, according to all the girls who haven't quite figured out how to whisper properly, the cutest boys in the sixth grade?

Steve thinks that it's lucky that he doesn't have to actually like his classmates – Tommy and Carol are the only ones he really wants to spend time with – as long as he can pretend that he does. And, really, isn't pretending just another facet of persuasion? He's still convincing people of *something*, and that's really what he was born to do.

3. Chimaera

Summary for the Chapter:

The Chimera was reputed to be “near invincible,” for she had the strength of a lion, the cunning of a goat, and the venom of a snake. But this monster’s most unusual and deadly weapon, by far, was her ability to breathe fire.

Steve and Tommy and Carol grow up, and they grow up together. This is important, because not all friends stay together as they grow.

Tommy and Carol and Elda read the English books and History chapters to Steve so that he can understand the words on the page, because when he tries, the letters scramble themselves up in the wrong order so that he cannot easily discern what they say. Carol helps Tommy with math and nags them about homework.

They grow up through Mondays and Tuesdays at Steve’s house after school, doing homework and learning to cook from Elda; through Wednesdays and Thursdays at Carol’s for more homework and a trip to Family Video, where Carol’s older brother works and lets them borrow an R-rated film each week; through sleepovers at Tommy’s house every Friday after going to the Arcade, or for a movie at the Hawk.

They are together through Carol’s braces and complicated hair routines and first attempts at contacts and experiments with makeup; and Steve’s abrupt wardrobe change and discovery of Farrah Fawcett and identity crisis; and Tommy’s hatred and subsequent attempts at removing his freckles, and his string of dates with girls he doesn’t like and will never love.

Carol joins the Drama Club and the AV Club, and Steve tries and sticks with baseball and basketball and swimming, and Tommy joins the basketball team, too, and picks up the saxophone and loves it and

sticks with it even though it's harder than he expects, even though it's not cool.

They grow up, and Tommy gets better at math but really has a mind for remembering the dates and corresponding events of history; and Steve still struggles with reading and writing and keeping his trains of thought on the right tracks but there's just something about the sciences that click for him – maybe it's all the abbreviations and the numbers that manage to stay untangled on paper, or maybe it's his undeniable interest and will to try; and Carol is good at school and terrible with people who aren't Tommy and Steve and her family and their families because she just doesn't really care about the people she holds no loyalty to, and maybe that's because she knows they hold no loyalty to her.

Carol asks Tommy and Steve, more than once – and it is mostly Tommy, but both the boys are guilty of catering to the whims of others, the both of them are people-pleasers – why they bother putting effort into people who don't care about them; neither Tommy nor Steve is ever able to provide her with a satisfactory explanation.

They grow up, and though they change and become different people than they were at the start, they do not grow apart.

They live through the beginning and end of middle school; through the fury and tempers that come with losing a loved one; through the start of high school; through the trauma that pushes them higher up the totem pole and drags them deep into the dark depths of despair where nightmares ride along the edges of sanity.

They remain together through parents getting promotions and finishing school and making money, through a move to the other side of town (to the rich side of town because the parents've got the money, so why not spend it?), through contacts and flat irons and curlers and becoming pretty.

They grow up through the excitement of a younger sibling that comes and the heartbreak when it doesn't last the week, and they learn that it is dangerous to love – they learn that loving can break your heart, that feeling is a good way to get hurt. It doesn't stop them, of course, because they already feel too much.

They grow up, and Steve's *second* kiss is Tommy; and Tommy and Carol, who can keep a secret (who already keep a secret for him) kiss each other; and though they only ever press their mouths to Steve's cheeks, they're good at not making him feel left out.

So they grow up together, and they rule over the tiny town of Hawkins: King Steve and his Hands, or King Tommy and his Hands, or Queen Carol and her Hands, although Carol and Tommy like to joke that it is really Queen Carol and her concubine and his Hand (they only ever say this when Steve is the only other one to hear, and only after he finally realizes that it isn't really Tommy – or at least not *just* Tommy – who he wants to kiss). To the general public though, it is King Steve and his Hands because Steve is the richest of the three, and single and relatively attainable, unlike Tommy and Carol.

So, they rule together – just as they have grown together – but Steve is the figurehead.

When Steve is in eighth grade, Elda gets sick.

At first, it's just a nasty cough. They think it's a cold – unpleasant, but nothing major – nothing to worry about. Then she starts coughing up blood, and her chest starts hurting. Elda insists that it's nothing to worry about, but when she starts losing weight, and when she mentions that her bones are hurting and tries brushing it off as old age Steve persuades her to go to the doctor.

Elda and Steve drive out to Indianapolis for her appointment, and Steve fluctuates between being bored out of his mind and vibrating with nerves the entire drive.

He tries to sit still, he really does, but the inside of the car is silent in a way that is entirely too similar to the lab. Elda must sense his restlessness because she slides in the mixtape he made for her last week; it has an odd combination of Electric Light Orchestra, Queen, Pink Floyd, Michael Jackson, and The Police on it. In a way, the music calms him down, and so they arrive on time and in one piece.

From there, everything goes downhill.

The doctor asks Elda questions about her family history; Steve is allowed to stay in the room for that part, but then the doctor asks him to leave while she does Elda's physical exam. He opens his mouth to convince her that he should be allowed to stay, but one stern look from Elda tells him that he'll be in big trouble if he does. Steve's shoulders slump, and he gives the doctor his big, sad puppy-dog eyes, which work on everyone except Elda.

Well, they work on everyone except Elda and the doctor, apparently.

Elda glares at him on his way out, and Steve smiles angelically at her. He didn't *say* anything to the doctor, so he couldn't have persuaded her anyway; he can't be faulted for trying to manipulate her in other normal people ways.

Out in the corridor, Steve leans back against the wall in a relaxed pose that Tommy and Carol have assured him looks very cool. He supposes that he looks less cool when he kicks impatiently at the floor with a white sneaker, or when he lets his head fall back against the wall every now and then, but he can't sit still.

He likes to think that he doesn't care – much – about how cool he looks at the moment, because Elda is sick, and he's not allowed in the room. Steve has never been fond of secrets, and it feels like one is being kept from him with the way he was heartlessly shut away from Elda.

He scuffs his shoe against the floor again and follows it up with the faint thump of his head against the wall. The sound of it is loud in the silent hallway, and Steve huffs loudly just to fill up the emptiness.

This whole place – with its blank walls, and its polite but disinterested staff, and its many, many closed doors, and its too-clean scent – reminds him of the lab. He doesn't *like* it, and he especially doesn't like it when the door opens and the doctor – in her white lab coat that looks just like the ones *they* wore – ushers him back inside, where Elda is sitting on the exam table with a shapeless piece of fabric – white, with tiny purple diamonds – draped over her frail body.

"Why are you wearing that? What is she doing to you?" Steve

demands, and if there's a hint of fear in his voice, well. Who can blame him, when Elda is wearing a gown that looks like the ones he and his siblings used to wear? He looks accusingly at the doctor, who is politely baffled by his outburst.

"Steve," Elda says firmly, and Steve tries to calm down, tries to take a deep breath and stop fidgeting. It mostly works. "My wearing this," Elda continues patiently, "makes Dr Sinclair's job easier."

"What's she need to do?" he asks resignedly, like he's bored with the proceedings, like he's the one in charge, here, and they need his permission to do whatever they're going to do.

"She just needs to run some tests," Elda replies, "and we'll go from there."

"Okay," Steve breathes, and he doesn't protest *too* much when he is sent out of the room again. He tells himself that it's because Elda looks thinner and paler than ever, that it's because she's got dark circles under her eyes even though she's been sleeping more than usual, that it's because she hasn't been feeling well, that it's because she's here because he asked her to be, just in case, so he shouldn't be making things harder than they need to be, and it is because of those things, at least in part. It is because of that – it's option *E*, all of the above – but it's also because, deep down, Steve is scared that something is really wrong with her, and he doesn't think he can handle being in the room while Dr Sinclair tries to figure it out.

He goes back out into the hall without a bloody nose, and he sinks to the floor so that he can wrap his arms around his legs and rest his chin on his knees, and he tries to pretend that the blank walls that stretch out before and behind him don't bother him, except – he's great at lying to other people, but – he's never been good at lying to himself.

He is alone in the hall for a while; it is something he becomes familiar with in the following months: he sits alone in the hall, alone in his room, alone even when he's surrounded by people. He sits alone because it isn't possible that anyone else knows what he's going through.

A lot of tests and appointments and confused-disappointed-concerned frowns later, and Elda is getting worse, not better. They are in the hospital so often that Steve has started bringing his homework with him on the days that he is not at Tommy's or Carol's; they are in the hospital so often that Steve has decided that they will never know what is wrong with Elda.

And then one day, Dr Sinclair comes back with test results and a solemn look on her face, and she tells them what the problem is.

Cancer is Elda coming home and, on the good days, teaching him how to cook his favorite meals, and the foods he likes well enough, and the things he doesn't like much at all that are good for him. When she isn't bogged down with the side effects of chemo and radiation therapy, she shows him how to separate the lights and darks, how to work the washing machine and the dryer, how to remove the lint screen and clean it before every load, how to fold the clean clothes and organize them; when she is feeling under the weather, she *tells* him what the best methods for cleaning this, that, and the other are, and she convinces him that keeping a clean house is important for a person's general health and happiness.

When Elda is feeling particularly good, they go to one of the empty fields, and – even though he's only thirteen (going on fourteen next month) – teaches him how to change gears, and use his mirrors, and drive in reverse, and park neatly. "You will need to know this some day," she tells him, and so Steve nods and tries again when the car stalls, or when he goes a little crooked, or when he accidentally backs into a row of corn.

So there are good days, and there are bad days. On the good days, they don't talk about her illness, or the fact that she is preparing him for a time when she is no longer around to take care of him. On the bad days, they don't talk at all, because Elda can't get out of bed, and doesn't want to talk or eat or do anything except stare into space, and Steve walks through the halls and slips in and out of the rooms of their big, empty house, and he tries to pretend that everything is fine, that Elda is healthy, that he's not as alone as he feels.

On one of her good days, which are few and far between, now, Elda makes a phone call, and a half-hour later, there is a knock at the

front door. Steve opens it and ushers the man on the front porch inside. Elda sends him up to his room to work on homework, and he struggles his way through the scrambled-up words in *The Outsiders*.

He doesn't really get what it's about because Tommy and Carol aren't here to read it to him, but by the time he has finished the chapter, he's crying. Death is always sad, but it's sadder when the person dying is like Pony-boy. He didn't deserve to die, but he couldn't be bothered to stay.

Steve knows that Elda would stay if he asked her, but in all the stories he's listened to, the characters never stay when they're asked. Steve bets it's because the person asking isn't persuasive enough, so he resolves to *persuade* Elda to stay. She'll have to, then, and then he won't be alone.

Done with *The Outsiders*, Steve thunders down the stairs and into the living room, intent on making Elda stay. When he gets there, though, the man from the porch is still there.

"Steve," Elda says feebly, and Steve's shoulders sag. He hates seeing the evidence of her illness weighing her down. "This is Chief Hopper. I was just explaining the situation to him."

Oh, Steve thinks. This must be what they've been practicing for. Steve focuses on Chief Hopper and delivers the rehearsed lines. "My parents have decided that, should Elda pass away, I am old enough to live on my own and take care of myself, as long as you are willing to check in on me every now and then to ensure that I'm behaving myself." He looks up at Hopper with wide eyes and wipes his nose. "You *are* willing to keep an eye on me if need be, aren't you?"

Hopper frowns, as though something in him objects to the idea of Steve living on his own with only minimal supervision. "Of course," he relents, and Steve fights back his satisfied smile. "And if Elda passes, I want you to know that you can come to me about anything," Hopper adds. "You can come to me even if she doesn't die, okay kid?"

Steve aims his doe eyes at the chief and offers him a brilliant smile. "Okay, Chief."

Hopper nods, turns on his heel, and leaves.

Steve turns to Elda, who says, “Good job, Steve. But remember: from now on, this is the only reason you should use your powers on someone without their consent, okay? Consent is a very important thing.”

“Yes, Elda,” Steve says dutifully, and ignore the pit in his stomach when he thinks of his plan.

“And,” Elda adds thoughtfully, “Never tell anyone about your powers. You don’t want the lab to find you.”

Steve frowns: he thinks that keeping secrets is a lonely way to go through life, but Elda is sick, so he agrees.

Elda is sicker than ever on Christmas Eve. She is so sick, in fact, that she goes in and out of consciousness, and when she is conscious, she does not recognize him. Steve isn’t sure what to do: Elda’s breath is coming slowly, and the strength she requires to take them rattle her ribcage; her forehead is hotter than he thinks it’s ever been, and she doesn’t recognize him.

She hears him, though. He knows because she turns toward him and mumbles at him whenever he calls her name or talks to her. He figures that hearing him is good enough: he has practiced persuading animals to do what he wishes without them looking at him, and he and Elda had been working together to practice on her when she wasn’t so sick. He has made her do things before, and he can do it again.

“Elda,” Steve whispers, and Elda turns her pale, sweaty face in his direction. “You have to get better, okay?” he pushes himself, tries to persuade her with everything inside of him. “You *have* to get better, Elda. You’ll get better, you just have to *listen*. You have to get better,” he repeats when there is no change in the pallor of her skin, and, his voice breaking, he adds: “You can’t *leave* me.”

He wipes at his nose, but there is only the smallest amount of blood on his sleeve when he pulls his arm away. He swallows, and crosses

his fingers and toes for luck, and when nothing changes, he prays to a God he's not sure he believes in, and then to all the gods he can think of, and then to the universe itself, and he tries to *persuade* them to make Elda better, but it's like no one's listening.

No one is listening, and Elda is still sick.

Steve does the only other thing he can think of, and calls Dr Sinclair, and when she doesn't answer, he calls Chief Hopper.

Hopper arrives in record time and drives both Steve and Elda to the hospital, where she is swept away. Steve is confined to the waiting room, and he sits mulishly at Hopper's side, kicking his feet at the empty air.

Hopper shifts restlessly, and Steve says, without thinking, "Please don't leave me."

The Chief blinks at him, sighs, and holds his arms out. Steve crawls into them and refuses to think about how he's thirteen – fourteen in three days – and therefore much too old for this, and he tries not to compare Hopper's hug to Elda's. "I won't, kid," Hopper promises, and Steve relaxes in his arms and waits.

Eventually, a nurse comes out and says, "She's stable for now. We're not sure –"

"Can I see her?" Steve asks pitifully, and the nurse relents. Steve follows her to Elda's cot, and he sits in the chair beside her. He holds one of her fragile, wrinkled hands between his own. "Please don't leave me," he whispers futilely.

"If she had a choice, kid," Hopper says, his hand dropping onto Steve's shoulder. Steve looks up at him and thinks that the Chief looks like he's going to be sick. "Man, if she had a choice, she wouldn't leave you for anything."

Steve shakes his head. Of course Elda has a choice. All she has to do is *listen*. All she has to do is do what he tells her. He tells Hopper as much, and he sighs.

"That's not the way it works, kiddo," he says, and Steve shrinks back

into his seat, refusing to look him in the eye.

“It does for me,” Steve tells him mutinously.

Hopper gives him a considering look. “Maybe most of the time,” he concurs, “but that’s not how death works. Death doesn’t listen to anybody, even somebody who’s got as much to lose as you do.”

“How would you know?” Steve snarls, feeling once again like no one understands his pain.

Hopper looks hurt, and Steve feels something like regret for his outburst. “My daughter died,” Hopper tells him. “Just last year. I would know because I tried everything. I prayed, and I bargained with death, and I bargained with fate, and with Sara... nothing worked. It’s just the way the world is, kid, and there’s nothing you or I can do to change that. The world and its workings are too broken for one person to fix.”

Steve mulls over Hopper’s words as he looks at Elda’s sleeping form. Like this, even with her body supported by pillows, and tubes connecting her to the beeping machines around her, and her hand in his, she looks peaceful. Steve looks down and feels sorrow well up in his throat. He’s not sure if it’s for himself or for Hopper; he thinks maybe it’s for both of them. “I don’t want her to leave me,” he confesses into the silence punctuated only by his and Hopper’s breathing, and the steady beeping of the monitors and life support. “Everyone always leaves me.”

Hopper squeezes his shoulder and Steve doesn’t even try to keep the sob from escaping his throat. “Me too, kid,” Hopper says sadly. “Me too.”

Elda dies at seven o’clock on Christmas morning, and while Steve grieves her, he also hates her for leaving him behind.

4. Empusa

Summary for the Chapter:

Empusae... were fearsome daimones which assumed the forms of beautiful women to lure young men to their beds to feed on their flesh and blood.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is where the non-con tag comes in, so please read with caution; it is also the reason for the rating. If that makes you uncomfortable, you can probably stop reading at "It is November..." and not miss anything too *too* important.

It's barely nine in the morning on the first day of summer when Steve, Tommy, and Carol decide that it is both too nice out to be cooped up inside and too hot to go anywhere besides the pool just outside. Steve goes up to his room to change into a bathing suit, leaving Tommy and Carol to dig out whatever suits of their own they've left behind from previous visits.

They reconvene outside, all in the appropriate swimwear – Steve in midnight blue swim shorts, Tommy in a pair of bright red trunks, and Carol in an emerald green bikini. Tommy has three fluffy white towels and sunscreen in his arms; Steve holds a pitcher of yellow lemonade in one hand, partially filled with bobbing ice cubes, and three tall glasses in the other; Carol bears a plate of hastily made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, napkins, and a Tupperware container of watermelon. The three of them dump their wares onto the ovular glass table that sits between the lounge chairs lining the side of the clear blue pool.

Even by the water, it is a hot day. Steve has already stripped off his shirt so that all that remains are his swim trunks, but they are a deep, dark blue, and cling warmly to his skin with the heat of the sun and

the particles of sweat that bead up on his skin in a slick sheen of tears.

The air is unusually hot, but he is not yet warm enough to subject his body to what he knows is frigid water – there have not been enough warm days before this one to warm up the pool, and Steve hasn't gotten around to turning the heater on. There are not many options for shaded areas by the pool, and so Steve tries to bear the heat with sunscreen slathered thickly over the planes of his body, and a glass of iced lemonade – glimmering water droplets bubble up on the clear glass where they refract the sunlight in a myriad of vibrant hues before slip-sliding their way down the curved sides, where they pool in a slowly engorging ring around the bottom of his cup.

The warmth of the cloudless blue sky and the barely-there breeze make Steve feel lethargic and slow, and his eyelids drag down to block the sun from his view; he can still see the red glow of the daylight fighting its way through the thin layers of his skin, but rather than keep him awake, it lulls him asleep.

"Steve," Carol's gentle voice drags him into wakefulness, and he cracks open an eye to look at her. "You should put on more sunscreen so that you don't burn."

He sits up, feeling hot all over; he slathers another coat of sunscreen on his front and allows Carol to get his back and shoulders. The sweeping motion of her palms against his skin is soothing, and Steve finds himself sagging in front of her, his attention caught on the glistening lines of sweat that are hidden in the creases of his elbows, the glittering evidence of his body's excess heat thin and silver and delicate where it branches across his skin like lacy old scars, or spider silk.

Now that he has noticed the sweat clinging to him, Steve cannot help but pay attention to the rapidity with which the smooth white lotion is absorbed into his skin. It soaks in fast, adding a layer to the hours old barrier that prevents the rays of the sun from doing the same; he notices, though – when he stretches his arms over his head and arches his back to free his bones from the last vestiges of sleep, and his shorts slip down a bit to hang precariously from the sharp summit of his hipbone – that a veneer of pale sunlit gilt has been airbrushed

onto the moon-pale surface of his skin. The blue veins that spiderweb their way beneath the paper-thin layers of his skin are more prominent when they are hidden by the untouched silver than by sun-soaked gold.

Too warm to be comfortable, now, Steve wanders over to the diving board and perches on the end of it; he curls his toes over the edge and stares down at the cool blue water. The board is rough and gritty beneath his feet as he gets into the position that has been drilled into him by his team's diving instructor ever since he first started attending swim practices last year.

Steve flexes his ankles and knees and pushes off the board with his thighs, his arms coming up alongside his ears and layering his hands into a point that breaches the frigid water, dividing it into two parts so that his body can cut through the water, behind his fingers, without a dramatic splash.

When he resurfaces, Tommy and Carol are clapping. Tommy is enthusiastic as he shouts, "I think that's your best one yet, buddy!"

In contrast, Carol's applause is more disinterested – but then, Steve is well aware that she prefers watching him and Tommy play basketball and would much rather watch Steve at one of his baseball games than at a swim meet, though she has told him, more than once, that baseball doesn't really excite her. Steve doesn't blame her. After all, he would much rather watch one of the plays the Drama Club puts on – often with Carol in a lead role – than attend the Science Fair that Carol's place in the AV Club ensures she participates in, and that's as someone who enjoys science. Carol, Steve knows, does not enjoy sports, and absolutely abhors them when she's forced to participate; to no one's surprise, gym class is the bane of her existence.

It takes some prodding, but Steve manages to get Tommy and Carol into the water with him. Carol grumbles the entire time it takes for her to submerge her body that he's lucky she's feeling so generous, and that if he were anyone else asking, she wouldn't have even dipped a toe in.

"If I wanted to," Steve says nonchalantly, like he's not giving up a huge secret, like he's not doing what Elda told him not to, "I could

have made you get in, whether you wanted to or not.”

Carol snorts. “Yeah, maybe you could’ve, but you’d’ve had to get Tommy’s help to throw me in.”

Tommy laughs, but Steve shakes his head. “No. I mean I could’ve told you to get in, and you would have obeyed.”

She tilts her head in confusion. “I love you, Steve, but there is nothing you could’ve said to get me in if I didn’t want to.”

Steve huffs in frustration. He’s never told anyone about his powers before, and now that he’s trying to tell Tommy and Carol, the words aren’t coming out right. “It isn’t about *what* I say,” he tries, “it’s about *how* I say it. It’s like Banshee; you know how he could do, like, a vocal trance?”

“Yeah,” Tommy and Carol say in unison, sounding a little bit doubtful.

“Okay, so it’s a little bit like that – I can make people or animals do what I say, or believe what I tell them to believe, but I have to, like, do it a specific way, and I get a bloody nose when I do it? And I can’t make anyone do something they aren’t physically capable of.”

“So... it’s like mind control,” Tommy says.

Steve can’t figure out what they’re feeling; his friends’ faces are expressionless, and their voices are flat and emotionless. He swallows and whispers, “Kind of. Elda used to call it charmspeak.”

Carol purses her lips. “Have you ever used it on us?”

Steve looks away. The laugh that forces its way out of his throat is closer to a sob than anything else; he lost Kali, and Elda, and now he’s going to lose Tommy and Carol, too. It feels like everyone’s always leaving him, and he doesn’t know how he’ll handle it if his friends leave him because of something he can’t help. “I’ve used it on nearly everyone in Hawkins,” he tells them, trying to keep his fear out of his voice. “When we first moved here, I told everyone that Elda was my nanny because my parents are always away on business trips; I told everyone that my name is Steve Harrington. I – I never

used it on you guys, but I used it on the people in town who'd get the story around without it being suspicious, and they told everyone else, and everyone believes it. I've never used my abilities directly on you to make you believe or do anything, but secondhand? Yeah."

"Your name isn't Steve Harrington?" Tommy asks, astonished.

At the same time, Carol says, "So even though what we know about your family isn't real, our friendship is?"

"No, it's not; Harrington was Elda's mother's lover's last name, and he owned the house before he willed it to Elda's family. And *I* think our friendship is real, at least." He shrinks into himself. "I don't know if you do, anymore, but I swear I have never and will never use my charmspeak on you without your knowledge and consent."

Tommy's eyebrows draw together, and he demands, "What *was* your real name, then?"

"Of course our friendship is real," Carol replies, like the idea of her believing otherwise is ludicrous. "And you mean that if we asked you to, like, show us, or something, then you would?"

Steve coughs in embarrassment. "If you wanted me to show you, then I would," he confirms tentatively. "And I don't know what name my parents gave me, but up until I was eight, I went by Seven."

Tommy makes a face, like a person being called by a number is baffling to him. Steve thinks that maybe it is, even though that's how he grew up.

At his friends' demands, Steve tells them his whole sordid history, and, when Carol practically orders him to show her what he can do, he persuades her to dunk a sandwich in the water before eating it. He wipes away the blood that has started dripping from his nose at the same time she emerges from the pool, swearing revenge. At Tommy's nod, he taps his left hand against his friend's wrist, transferring a little extra energy, and Tommy rushes forward to push Carol back in the pool; his shove sends her out into the middle of the water, and, Tommy, with an astonished look on his face, cannonballs in after her.

Steve smiles and dives in after them, glad that they aren't leaving him out of fear that he'll make them do whatever he wants. He never thought, after Eight left, and, later, Elda died, that he'd want people to get close to him. But he finds that he likes being known; he likes being trusted.

It is November of Steve's freshman year, and he is at the first party he has ever attended – it is one he wasn't invited to, but that Carol's older brother had told them about and driven them to. Someone suggests playing Seven Minutes in Heaven, and Steve finds himself in the circle of players, with Tommy and Carol nowhere to be found, waiting for his turn. The spinning bottle pairs him with a senior girl who gives him a shark like grin and pulls him up from where he is sitting on the ground. She drags him behind her to the designated room, closes the door behind them, and locks it.

Steve and the girl come out seven minutes later – her glowing with satisfaction and him feeling shaken and sick.

The girl – Steve never bothers to learn her name, because he knows that if he knows it he will hate a person and not an idea, not a memory – tells the group, afterward, "I came first," like it's an accomplishment. She seems pleased, and she offers him a sly smile, like what they did – what she did to him – isn't tearing him up inside.

But she tells the group, and by the end of the game – which Steve steps out of after that first turn, forcing a smile and saying, "One per night," to everyone who protests, as though this is a thing he'll make a habit of – it seems like everyone at the party knows.

Maybe he looks pale when Tommy and Carol find him, because they immediately move to flank him, and together the three of them push their way out of the house. His friends are more than a little drunk, and Steve isn't much better – though he is not so drunk that he cannot remember a perfunctory kiss (his first), and a hand gripping tight around his wrist, and harsh, whispered encouragement that did nothing to quell the sick feeling that coiled in knots in his stomach – but they manage to stumble back to his house, and Steve is simultaneously glad for and dreading its austere, cold emptiness.

“She said she came first,” Steve whispers into the darkness, knowing that his words will reach his friends’ ears when they are pressed tight against him, their bodies purifying lines of heat. Ashamed, he continues, his words even quieter than before. “She should have said that she’s the only one that came at all.”

Carol hisses her fury into the blackness that surrounds them, and Tommy slams his fist into the bed.

Steve swallows, and his throat squeezes tight as he does so, as though his body is reluctant to admit the saliva he has tainted with his words.

“Steve,” Carol murmurs a moment later, “did you want it?”

“No!” he nearly shouts, unable to keep his body from shivering in disgust. “No,” he repeats, quieter, as though the redundancy will make the girl stop now that it’s over.

“Tell Hopper,” Tommy suggests, his voice laced with quiet rage.

“I can’t,” Steve replies, his voice cracking painfully around the words. “I can’t.” He feels hot tears well up in his eyes, stinging at the corners before burning salty trails down the sides of his face, his temples, his cheeks. He swipes at them angrily. “I don’t even know

her name. I don’t –” his voice shatters again, this time around a sob, and more tears spill out. “I tried to stop her. I – I tried to make her stop, but she was stronger than me. And she didn’t listen when I told her to stop.”

His nose hadn’t even bled when he’d pleaded with her, and he wonders if he’d even been saying the words, or if he’d just been thinking them. He *thinks* he said them, thinks he molded his voice into specific words that were meant to persuade her, but came out pleading instead. He thinks that maybe there’s a difference between persuading and pleading.

“It’s not your fault,” Tommy says furiously. “If you said no or stop or even wait then she should have listened. She should have listened if you said anything other than yes. You shouldn’t have had to use your

powers to make her stop, and it isn't your fault that you couldn't, okay? It is not your fault."

Steve swallows again in the darkness and offers the only piece of information he can remember about the girl because he knows Carol will want to know – he knows Carol will find out who it was and punish her, and even if it won't fix things, it'll make her feel better. "She's a senior." He drops the words into the air, flat and lifeless, and then he turns on his side, puts his back to Carol, and doesn't say anything else for the rest of the night.

That night, a faceless girl creeps into his dreams: she is stronger than him and has no ears to hear when he cries out for her to *stop, wait, no*. Her grip around his fingers is slimy and tight and warm, and she guides his wrist in an unfamiliar motion that ends with her gripping his fingers tighter and a disconcerting wetness filling his palm.

Each time he wakes up, he remembers that this is not the first time in his lifetime that people have shown themselves to be monsters.

In the morning, Steve, bundled up in a fuzzy blue blanket and curled up in the corner of the big leather couch he and Elda chose together, cannot keep from staring blankly out the huge bay window that looks out over the pool and into the forest. He stares outside because it is better than staring inside, because he is inside, and he cannot bear to look at himself, with his body that no longer belongs solely to him, and his wrist that is decorated with a bracelet of bruises that make him sick to look at.

Mirroring his mood, the sky is gray and dull and dreary, and it is pouring rain that catches in droplets on the wilting brown leaves that are still clinging, with the last of their strength, to their home trees before puddling together, the water clinging to itself before it joins the heartbroken tears that fall from the heavens in steady, streaming rivulets. It has been autumn for weeks, now, and Steve and Tommy and Carol have long since covered the pool, but the rain forms miniature lakes along the top of the thick material, and those puddles are matched by the ones that sprawl across the low points of the lawn, reflecting a murky, dirt-stained sky.

Carol and Tommy are in the kitchen making breakfast. Carol, who

cannot be trusted around the stove, is in charge of making toast and hot chocolate for the three of them; Tommy, who can be trusted around both oven and stove, is making omelets and bacon. Of the three of them, Steve is the only one who can really be trusted with a knife, but today it is Tommy's job to cut up the fruits and vegetables.

From the living room, Steve can almost hear the sounds coming from the kitchen; Tommy and Carol are being quieter than usual this morning, and when they come into the room, heavily laden with food and worried expressions that he pretends he doesn't see.

He wishes Elda was still alive. Carol and Tommy are great, and they're endlessly supportive, but Steve knows – and they know – that they don't really know how to deal with this.

For the first time ever, Steve feels lost and lonely in Tommy and Carol's company.

After breakfast, which Steve tries to eat but can only pick at because the shame from last night seems to have taken up permanent residence where it sits heavy in his chest and clogs up his throat, Steve lies down so that his head is in Tommy's lap and his feet are in Carol's. Tommy runs his fingers through Steve's hair in a metronomic motion, his short fingernails scratching at the scalp before tugging up and through the thick strands, tangling and untangling them, pulling gently at the top. Carol runs her hand over his calf where it is covered by the blanket, and neither she nor Tommy says a word.

A few hours later, when his friends are due to be expected at home for lunch, Steve walks Tommy and Carol to the front door. He gives them a tired smile and a long hug goodbye before closing the front door on them and the rest of the world.

He covers all the windows and puts on one of Elda's old records – one of the indubitably sad ones that he always cries to – and he huddles back in his corner of the couch and lets the tears fall.

He wishes, not for the first time since Elda's death, that the house wasn't so big and empty.

On Sunday morning, there is a knock on the door. At first, Steve ignores it, hoping that whoever is on the other side will go away if he doesn't answer. But when they knock again less than five minutes later, he pulls himself up from his place on the couch and shuffled over to the door.

Standing on the front porch is Hopper; Steve knows from experience that Hopper will not leave until he's allowed to come in, and so he opens the door.

Hopper walks past him and into the living room, where he sits down on the couch and motions for Steve to join him. Steve crams his body between Hopper's and the corner of the couch where's he's spent the past day and a half.

"Do you want to talk about it, kid?" Hopper asks gruffly, pushing gently on Steve's shoulder so that he sags down to rest his head on Hopper's thighs. Like this, Steve can't see Hopper's face, and he thinks that maybe he can pretend that it's Elda who he's lying on instead of the man she chose for her stand-in.

"Not – not right now," Steve stutters, and relaxes when Hopper only hums in acknowledgement and places a warm hand on his shoulder. Steve allows himself to fall asleep and wakes up grateful for the reprieve from the dreams that Hopper's presence has given him.

He is mostly aware when Hopper shifts beneath him, placing Steve's head on one of the cushions before padding out of the room. When Steve finally finds the energy to sit up, Hopper is coming back into the living room carrying a plate of sandwiches and a glass of milk, which he places on the coffee table in front of the couch.

Under Hopper's gimlet eye, Steve takes a bite of the sandwich, and then, suddenly realizing just how hungry he is – he thinks the last time he ate was breakfast with Tommy and Carol the day before, where he had picked at the food they made, feeling too sick to eat – scarfs down the entire thing, and then another. He washes the second sandwich down with half the glass of milk, and it is only then that he remembers to breathe.

He slows down for the third sandwich, and Hopper, pleased that

Steve is eating, relaxes into the couch and slings his right arm over the back. Steve sets the plate back on the table and swallows the rest of the milk, and then, with a cursory glance at Hopper to ensure that it is okay to touch him, he curls into the space under Hopper's arm. He feels safely trapped by the side of the couch and Hopper's flank. Steve drifts to sleep again.

When he wakes up, Steve is in his own bed. It is dark out, but the lamp on his nightstand is switched on; there is a note tucked under the base. Steve has to read through it several times before he manages to decipher the words.

It reads:

Kid,

Got called into work. Will check in on you tomorrow at four. Don't forget to eat and please try to get to school.

Hopper

Steve eats soup and toast for dinner, then showers, pretending that the hot water will wash away the unwanted, bruising grip before it becomes a memory. He towels off, puts on pajamas. sets his alarm, and goes back to bed, feeling more than a little lonely.

On Monday, he bikes over to Tommy's, and they bike over to Carol's, and together the three of them bike to school.

They hear his new sobriquet in the hallways even before the first bell rings:

King Steve, like it's a medal of honor, like he's done something to be proud of. News from the party has made it to school, fast, and it seems like all anyone can talk about is how Steve Harrington – the cutest freshman, the richest kid in school, the basketball player, baseball player, the swimmer – made a girl – a *senior* girl, no less – come first, with only his fingers.

(For some reason that Steve cannot discern, it is not the fact that he was with a senior girl that everyone fixates on; they are more concerned with the fact that he made her *come*, and that he made her

come *first*. The finger part, too, is also an important point of discussion.

Imagine, he hears the girls say in the halls, or in the backs of the classes they share with him, like they want him to hear it. *Imagine how good he must be with his mouth or his dick.*

He really does have nice hands, another girl murmurs as he walks past.

His fingers are so long and slender, another girl agrees. *They're like a musician's, and you know that musicians have stronger fingers than most... think what he could do with them.)*

They call him *King Steve*, like what he did was a *choice*, like it wasn't forced on him, like he doesn't want new hands in the place of the ones contaminating his body.

He wonders what's wrong with him that he didn't want to have sex with an experienced, pretty, older girl. He wonders why she had to make him when so many people would have loved to be in his place.

Part of him thinks that maybe he deserved it – if he *really* didn't want it, he should have been able to make her stop, and since he didn't, he has to suffer the consequences.

The consequences, it turns out, are him and Tommy and Carol being invited to sit with the seniors (the basketball players and cheerleaders, the most popular kids in school), a much-envied position. The consequences are a brave face and brave words when the senior boys ask about *how*, and he replies, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, "I just did what she told me." The consequences are the girls telling him what a gentleman he is, making sure *she* got off first.

(The consequences are sitting there, in the high seat, day after day, week after month after year, acting as though he doesn't feel sick to his stomach because he's too ashamed to tell the truth about how he got there. The consequences are the headaches he gets from the tears he cries every day, and the wet spots on Tommy and Carol's clothes when they *let him*.)

The thing is, those seniors – and everyone else in the damn school –

let him talk and talk and talk, whether he has something important to say or not, and so Steve does talk. He talks as much as he can because they're all willing to listen, and it doesn't even matter if he's telling them anything, because they're listening, they're listening, and even though they aren't really hearing what he's saying – *please, stop, please, wait, please, no* – they're listening, and what he needs right now is people who listen – he needs to know that they can listen, in case he needs to persuade them of something in the future.

He thinks maybe he didn't talk enough, and that's why the girl kept going. Maybe she couldn't *hear* him; so he talks louder and sharper, his words harsh and cutting and acerbic because he's hurting and he knows first-hand that pain is hard to miss, hard to ignore, and if he hurts people, well. That's a small price to pay to ensure that people listen to him when he speaks.

Hopper is waiting in his kitchen when Steve gets home from basketball practice. "Good day, kid?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

Steve twists his mouth and shrugs. "Not really."

Hopper's eyes sharpen and he tilts his head curiously. "What happened?"

Steve thinks that the way Hopper is sitting is deliberately non-threatening, like he wants to hear about Steve's day but doesn't want to push him into revealing something he's uncomfortable with. Steve moves to sit on one of the stools in front of the kitchen counter; it's a little dusty – he hasn't cleaned the house much recently, and he wonders if he should hire a maid. The idea doesn't appeal to him: he doesn't want a stranger in his space; he doesn't want to hear footsteps that don't belong to Tommy and Carol and Hopper; he doesn't want someone erasing the things that remind him that this house was where he lived with Elda. He doesn't want to risk forgetting her. "The kids at school were talking about me," Steve offers tentatively.

"What were they saying?" Hopper asks neutrally.

"They were calling me King Steve." He looks away, embarrassed, and continues, because that in and of itself doesn't sound like a bad thing; it doesn't sound like something that would constitute a bad day:

“They were talking about how I made this senior girl come first.”

Hopper raises his eyebrows. “What were you doing with a senior, Steve?”

“We were playing Seven Minutes in Heaven,” Steve mumbles, feeling silly, like Hopper won’t get it. “She made me,” he adds pitifully.

“Made you?” comes the mild, probing response.

“She made me touch her and she wouldn’t stop.”

“Let me get this straight,” Hopper says in a dangerous tone, and Steve shrinks away from him. Hopper must see his flinch, because when he speaks again, his voice is far gentler. “Some girl, who is probably eighteen years old, took advantage of you, and when she told everyone about it, she conveniently left out the part where you told her to stop?”

“Yeah,” Steve whispers, refusing to meet Hopper’s eyes with the admission.

Hopper growls. “What’s her name?”

“What?” Steve asks, shocked. “Why?”

“I want to know her name so that I can let her know that it’s not okay to take advantage of boys, regardless of their age, if they don’t say yes to having sex with her. I can’t actually put her in jail for what she did to you because I have no proof beyond your word, but this is the next best thing.”

“I –” Steve stammers. “Why would you put her in jail if you had proof of what she did?”

Hopper’s mouth twists into an unhappy moue. “I would *try* to put her away, kid. It probably wouldn’t work because you’re a boy and she’s a girl, but I would still try because what she did wasn’t right. It wasn’t lawful, kid, because she’s over the age of consent and you aren’t, and that’s only half the problem, because not only are you legally not old enough to consent in the state of Indiana, you also didn’t consent to have sex with her. If you said no, or wait, or stop,

or anything other than yes or some other affirmative, then you didn't consent to have sex, and she ignored you."

"Oh," Steve says. "I um... I don't know her name."

Hopper gives him a suspicious look. "And you're not just saying that in a misguided attempt to protect this girl from me?"

"No! I just intentionally never learned her name. It's harder to hate a person than a memory, you know? But I swear I'm not protecting her. All I know is that she's a senior; I can't even give you a physical description."

Hopper purses his lips. "Fine. But if you remember anything, or if you figure it out, let me know, okay kid?" He waits for Steve to nod. "Alright. Have you eaten anything today?"

"Not since lunch," he replies, feeling like a little kid who can't be trusted to take care of themselves.

A brief nod is the only acknowledgement Steve gets before Hopper is scooping up his keys and gesturing for Steve to go out the door ahead of him. They drive to Benny's Burgers, where they order two burgers, two fries, and a chocolate milkshake for Steve. It's late enough that, besides Benny, they're the only ones there.

They sit in silence while they wait for their food, Steve staring blindly out the window and Hopper lighting a cigarette that he takes a long drag of. "Hey, Hopper?" he asks suddenly, his voice low.

"Mm?" Hopper mumbles around the cig.

"Why didn't she just ask? Then I wouldn't feel..." he trails off. He's not quite sure how he feels. Contaminated? Sick? Dirty?

Hopper blows out a mouthful of smoke. "You'd really have to ask her that, kid. Maybe she didn't want to hear what you did or didn't want. Maybe she was too drunk or high or whatever to process it. No matter the reason why she didn't ask, the fact remains that she didn't, and you're forced to deal with the aftermath."

"Doesn't she know that consent is important?" He tries to sound

nonchalant when he asks, but... Well, he has to ask permission before telling people to do things; they have to consent to him screwing with their brain. Why shouldn't she have asked for his consent before he screwed with his body?

Hopper clears his throat. "I'd imagine she knows something about it. But hammering in the concept of consent is typically aimed at boys, because they tend to be bigger and stronger than girls. I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't occur to her that she should've asked, but that doesn't excuse the fact that she didn't stop when you asked her to."

The food arrives, and Steve picks at it until he realizes how hungry he really is.

"D'you think consent is used for everything?" he asks, a horrible idea coming to him. "Even, like experiments on people? On children?"

Hopper gives him an odd look. "I think that it should be," he says, "I also think that it's the Cold War, and there have been and still are, and likely will be in the future, unethical experiments; I think that it's not unlikely that some of these experiments involved children, and – depending on the severity of the experiment – I think that sometimes, the scientists involved would not receive informed consent."

"Informed consent?"

"Like... you know what'll happen, for the most part. You know what you're getting into, and you're okay with getting into it, and so you agree to take part in the experiment."

"But kids can't give informed consent. Babies can't, either," Steve protests.

"Sometimes, the parent's consent is good enough. And sometimes, there is no consent at all, and children disappear mysteriously, and no one ever knows quite what happened to them." Hopper sighs. "Kid, what's with the sudden interest in, like, the ethics behind child experimentation?"

Steve is silent for a moment, debating the merits of telling Hopper the truth. Tommy and Carol had reacted well, and Hopper seems to

care about him, so it might be okay. He takes a deep breath. “I was an experiment,” he rushes out.

Hopper looks at him, his brows furrowed, and asks, “What?”

“I um... I grew up in Hawkins Lab. I was an experiment.” He shoves up the sleeve of his shirt so that Hopper can see the dark ink of the 007 on his wrist that sits, permanent and stark, below his epidermis. “Elda said I was there from the time I was a baby. She didn’t know what my real name was, so we picked Steven when she got us out.”

Hopper’s eyes are fixed on the tattoo. “And you’re wondering if your parents gave you up willingly, or if you were stolen?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t imagine any parent willingly giving up their child to be experimented on,” Hopper murmurs, “but I can try to look for information about it, or about parents losing their child.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, kid. And for what it’s worth, I’m sure that your parents didn’t choose to give you up. Now. Tell me a little more about this tattoo. I assume it means that there are others.” He looks down at it again. “Possibly hundreds, given that there are three digits.”

Steve slides his sleeve back down. “Yes, there were others.” He shifts in the booth so that he’s a little more comfortable, and then says, “Can we talk about this somewhere else? I don’t want anyone to overhear.”

Hopper gives him a scrutinizing look before tossing a wad of cash on the table; he scoops up their trash and bins it on the way out.

“I grew up in Hawkins Lab,” Steve continues once they are in Hopper’s Chevy, “and I went by Seven. The others – my siblings – had numbers, too. I don’t know how many there were; the highest number I ever met was Eleven, and they took her away from the Rainbow Room when she was three. Elda was my overseer when I was at the lab. When I was eight, she planned out an escape for us, and Eight created an illusion so that we could get out.”

Steve sees Hopper frown out of the corner of his eye. “Eight created an illusion?”

“Yeah. That was her ability, plus a little empathy. We all have abilities. That’s why we had overseers.”

“Were they experimenting on you because you had abilities, or did their experiments give you abilities?”

“I don’t know. Elda never said. I think it’s because we had abilities, because they took Eight when she was older, and she had powers when I met her. And they had Eleven from when she was a baby, and she could do stuff, too.”

“Hm,” Hopper says. “What can you do?”

Steve flicks a nervous glance at him. He remembers telling Tommy and Carol about his powers; they had wanted to know if he’d used his charmspeak on them. He hadn’t, but he’d used it on Hopper. “I can make people do or believe what I tell them to,” he says tentatively, “and I can transfer energy.”

Hopper looks at him suspiciously, then says, “I assume you’ve made me do something? Or believe something?” in a resigned voice.

Steve is silent as they pull into his driveway. Hopper puts his Chevy in park and waits quietly, though Steve knows he already knows the answer. “Yeah,” he says softly, ashamed. “When Elda was sick, and you came to talk to her? And I told you that my parents thought I was old enough to live on my own as long as you kept an eye on me? I used them on you then.” He looks away, unable to meet Hopper’s eyes, where he is certain he’ll see disapproval about what he did. “I’m sorry,” he adds sadly. “I didn’t want to make you do anything you didn’t want to, but Elda thought it would be best. She thought it would keep any suspicion off me.”

Hopper sighs gustily before opening the car door. He shuts it behind him and walks to Steve’s house. Steve scrambles after him; he finds Hopper sitting on the couch with enough space between his body and the arm for Steve to fit.

“Can I sit?” Steve asks tentatively, gesturing at the empty space.

Hopper nods, and Steve sinks into the couch. He stares up at the ceiling, waiting for Hopper to tell him off, or leave, or hit him or something.

“I can’t say that I approve of you living on your own, but I think that’s why you and Elda talked to me, huh?” Hopper says finally. His voice is perfectly even, and Steve can’t tell what he’s thinking.

“Yeah,” Steve agrees.

“I’m not mad, kid,” Hopper tells him gently, and Steve looks up at him with wide eyes.

“You’re not?”

“No,” comes out on a soft sigh. Hopper shifts, slumping down on the couch so that they’re sitting more comfortably. “I’m just... disappointed that you guys thought that I wouldn’t have looked after you if you’d just asked. And maybe I wouldn’t have paid such close attention, but I still woulda been there for you if you’d wanted it, you know. You shouldn’t have felt like the only way I’d pay attention is if you made me. I’m sorry that you felt like that’s what you had to do.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Steve tells him.

“Maybe not,” is the doubtful reply. “Maybe not. But I’m the Chief of Police, and yeah, I was dealing with some personal shit – still am, really – but that should never have spilled over into my job. I’m supposed to protect this town. I’m supposed to protect you.” He shakes his head. “I will, now, and not because you made me, but because it’s my job, and because I care about you, kid.”

“You’re not leaving?” Steve asks in surprise.

“Nah. I’m not leaving. But kid?”

“Yeah?”

“Unless it’s really important, don’t use those powers of yours without informed consent, alright? Be better than that girl, and those

scientists, okay bud?" Hopper quirks a smile at him, and Steve feels the corners of his own lips twitch up in response.

"Yeah, okay."

Notes for the Chapter:

My head-canon for this universe is that if Steve had told Tommy and Carol about his powers, things would have gone the way of canon and would have ended up following the events in "out of the shadow" and "and set me free"

5. Demogorgon

Summary for the Chapter:

A demogorgon is a deity or demon, associated with the underworld and envisaged as a powerful primordial being, whose very name had been taboo.

Notes for the Chapter:

We are entering canon territory. Hopefully I wrote it in a way that it isn't dead boring.

Will Byers disappears on the sixth of November in eighty-three. Steve doesn't hear about it until the next day, and he's far too preoccupied with Nancy to care much; he ran away when he was much younger than Will, after all. And anyways, the kid'll come back eventually – he's got a mother and a brother who love him, so why wouldn't he?

Steve determinedly does not think about Kali, who was just a year or two younger than Will is now when she ran away in the middle of the night; she had him and Elda, and she never came back. But maybe the love Steve held for her back then – the love that was fostered by the lab he grew up in, by the people who stole Kali from her family and tried to force a new one upon her – wasn't enough.

Sometimes, Steve knows, love *isn't* enough.

He doesn't think about it.

So Will is missing, and Ms Byers is worried enough that there are search parties out for the kid; Jonathan, who is in Nancy's grade, and a year younger than Steve, is putting up missing posters. That's when Steve realizes that the Byerses are actually really concerned, but he can't help thinking – rather uncharitably, he knows – that it hasn't even been a full two days yet. Contrary to his experience, Steve is

certain that Will'll turn up soon. Kids run away all the time; they aren't *all* like Kali.

Nevertheless, something about the situation makes Steve uncomfortable enough that he doesn't want to be home alone; he throws an impromptu party – if having Tommy, Carol, and Nancy (and Barb, who Steve doesn't really *want* at his house, because he *knows* she doesn't like him – and that's because she's never bothered to get to know him outside of the rumors and gossip that make him out to be a heartless player) over counts as a party.

For the most part, it's fun. It's chilly out, but not freezing; Tommy and Carol are off in their own little world, chatting amongst themselves as they sip at their beers; Nancy and Barb seem a little uncomfortable at first, but Nancy at least relaxes soon enough. Barb is just as tense as she was when she arrived, but Steve doubts that she'll ever relax around him.

It's when Steve, Tommy, and Carol convince Nancy to shotgun a beer that everything starts going to shit. Or, no. It's when Nancy convinces Barb to try that everything goes to shit, because Barb accidentally stabs herself, and *that* makes her even more miserable than she was before.

Steve shows Barb to the bathroom and tells her that there's band aids and gauze for the cut if she wants it. He waits for her to come back into the kitchen before going back out into the pool area just as Carol shrieks and Tommy pushes her into the heated water. That seems to break the tension that had previously filled the air: Nancy sneaks up behind Steve and shoves him hard enough that he takes a few stumbling steps towards the edge of the pool before toppling in. He resurfaces just in time to see Nancy and Barb, their hands clasped tightly together, jumping in. The subsequent splash sends water into his eyes, but when their heads break through the water, they're both laughing, seeming lighter than they have all evening.

Steve grins over at his friends, who shrug off his thanks easily.

The five of them remain in the pool for a while, playing Marco Polo like they're preteens before Tommy manages to coax Carol onto his shoulders, and Steve gets Nancy onto his, and they try – shivering the

whole time – to throw the other team off balance. Nancy beats Carol and migrates from Steve’s shoulders to Tommy’s; Barb takes Nancy’s place on Steve’s shoulders, and Nancy loses that time. Then it is Barb against Carol, and then Barb and Nancy against Steve and Tommy, followed by Barb and Carol, and Carol and Nancy, and by the time they manage to pull themselves out of the pool, the scent of chlorine is strong in Steve’s nose; they’re all five of them soaked to the bone and shivering as the cold air pierces through their clothing; and everyone has managed to set aside their differences enough that Nancy and Carol are laughing together while Tommy gestures wildly at an amused Barb before he goes to collect Carol.

“Invite these two again,” Tommy calls as he follows Carol to the house; Steve grins at where Barb and Nancy have arranged themselves side by side on the diving board.

“I will,” he replies, feeling safe and content for the first time since Will disappeared. He guesses that all the hype around the situation has really gotten to him, even though he’s sure the kid’s just run off. He’ll come back soon enough; Steve is sure of it.

“Hey, Steve,” Tommy calls, drawing Steve out of his thoughts. “C’mere for a sec.”

Steve flashes Nancy and Barb a brief smile before going over to where his friends are standing just outside the sliding doors. “What’s up?” he asks curiously when he sees the uncharacteristically serious expression on Tommy’s face. The look Carol is giving him mirrors it.

“Just...” Tommy lowers his voice. “I don’t want you doing anything you regret. I know you think Nancy’s great, but I think you should think ahead a little for a situation like this, yeah? I mean, are you guys going to be friends forever, even after you break up? Are you going to be *together* forever? Is she someone you can trust, or who you’ll be able to trust with your secrets? And if she is, is she someone who’ll be angry at you because she thinks you’ve made her do something she doesn’t want to?”

Steve frowns and looks at Carol for help, but she’s nodding along with Tommy. He sighs.

"Just think about it," Tommy implores. "I know how you are about consent, alright? I don't want to risk her accusing you of something you didn't do because she doesn't understand. Okay? Just think about it," he repeats. "Make sure that whatever happens tonight is something you both really want, and that no one'll get hurt in the aftermath."

"I'll think about it," Steve reassures them. "I'll be careful, I promise." He smiles and backs away, watching as Tommy and Carol exchange a look before slipping inside the house. Steve goes back to Barb and Nancy.

The girls are still sitting on the diving board; Barb's feet are dangling over the pool, and her back is pressed against Nancy's.

"You guys ready to go inside?" Steve asks quietly, gesturing at their soaking wet clothes and shivering in his own as a faint breeze skitters across the surface of the pool, snatching up dying leaves from the ground and dancing with them. "We can get you some dry clothes, if you want. And you'll probably want to re-wrap that." He motions loosely at the gauze Barb is clamping tight around her finger; blood is beginning to seep through and collect ominously at the tip.

Nancy shivers slightly and stands.

"I'll be in just a minute," Barb says, staring down at the blue of the water. Steve watches her carefully. She seems even more reticent than usual, but maybe that's just because they were all laughing together, and she's just reverted back to her usual state.

"Okay," Steve says reluctantly. He doesn't really want to leave her out here by herself, but he's getting cold, and he can tell that Nancy is freezing. "I've got spare rooms for you guys if you want. Do you want your own, or do you guys want to share?"

Nancy and Barb exchange a glance that Steve thinks is filled with surprise. "I think we'll take separate rooms," Nancy says finally, and Barb nods.

"Sounds good," Steve shrugs. "Come with me, Nance, and we'll get you some dry clothes. Barb, I'll put something on the bed for you,

and I'll be in the kitchen so I can show you to your room, okay?"

Barb gives him a scrutinizing look. "Okay," she agrees. She turns back to stare into the depths of the pool. Steve wonders what it is about the water that holds her attention so completely, but her motionless form offers no clues.

Steve ushers Nancy inside and up into his room, which is still covered in the plaid wallpaper he and Elda had picked out years ago, back when he thought plaid was cool. Now, the coolest thing about it is the shade of blue, and even that's partly by association and partially due to the eerie light that creeps in through the open window. Steve casts a brief glance out of it; Barb is still in the pool area, still sitting on the diving board with her feet dangling above the water, still staring down into its depths as though she thinks it holds within it all the secrets of the universe. The wind howls outside, throwing itself violently against the glass like it wants in so that it can tear through the room and rip through his and Nancy's bones with the chill it carries in its embrace.

He turns back to Nancy, who is still shivering, and opens his closet; he pulls out three pairs of sweatpants and two shirts before walking into the en suite to grab towels. He hands one to Nancy and drops another on the bed beside the clothes he plans to drop in a room for Barb. He pulls off his soaked shirt and begins rubbing his torso dry. He is about to shuck his jeans when he remembers that Nancy is still in the room. She looks vaguely uncomfortable where she's standing in front of the window, so he says, "Sorry. If you want, you can go change in the bathroom."

A peculiar expression settles on her face, but she shrugs and replies, "I don't mind," before pulling off her own shirt. She hunches in on herself slightly under Steve's gaze, and he realizes that, of the two of them, he's the one who's done *anything*.

"You're beautiful, Nance," he tells her softly. He crosses the room, still in his soaking wet jeans, to where Nancy is standing, her dripping shirt held in her hands in front of her, in her bra, and he brushes his lips gently across hers. He thinks that if he takes this slow, he and Nancy could work together; he also thinks that they barely know anything about each other, and that she's someone he'd

love to be friends with if being a couple doesn't work out. He presses a final kiss to her lips before taking a step back and smiling down at her. "That's all for tonight," he says, moving backwards toward the bathroom so that he can finish changing.

She smiles back.

When he gets back out of the bathroom, he shows Nancy to one of the guest rooms; Tommy and Carol are in the master bedroom, as they usually are when they spend the night, so Steve puts Nance in the room across from him. There's an empty room beside it for Barb, and he puts the clothes for her on the bed after kissing Nancy goodnight.

He swings the towel over his shoulders and heads downstairs to the kitchen; he stands at the counter in front of the window and looks out. Barb is still on the diving board. Even from inside, Steve can tell that she's shivering, and he wonders if she plans on ever moving away from the pool.

"Barb still outside?" Nancy asks. Steve turns to see her standing in the door of the kitchen. She offers him a quiet smile before moving to stand by his side; they stare out at the eerie blue light reflecting off the surface of the water to stream into the room.

Steve looks down at his hands for a moment, noticing how milky the skin covering the bones of his fingers is in the dim light. "Just... sitting there," he agrees. "She looks kinda lonely."

Nancy laughs softly. "There's a difference between being alone and being lonely." She turns to lean against the counter, so that her back is facing Barb. "She's not really a people person. She's that person who only really needs a few people in her life; she can be alone in a crowd, or on a diving board at someone's house, but she's never *lonely*. At least, that's how she explained it to me. I get what you mean, though."

"Yeah?" Steve asks, glancing away from Barb to look at Nancy.

"She looks lonely," Nancy acknowledges. "But she's not like you. I think..." her lips quirk up at the corners again, and she turns her

head to face him, “I think you’re the type of person who needs other people, because when you’re alone in a crowd, or alone in your huge, empty house, you feel lonely.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, ripping his eyes from hers, feeling a little too seen by this girl who knows very little about him. The shadows outside are thick and dark, and the branches of the trees are stark and cold where the lights throw them in sharp relief against the night sky. They seem to be reaching down, searching for something with their long, spidery fingers. In the midst of it all, surrounded by the dark dome of the sky, and the spindly branches of the leaf-bare trees, and the blue light that glows beneath her, lighting her up, Barb looks perfectly at home. “She’s pretty cool,” he adds.

Steve doesn’t know how he didn’t see it before, doesn’t know how he didn’t see *her* before: here, in his back yard, is a girl who has adapted to the alone-ness the world has thrown at her; here is a girl, younger than Steve, who can sit surrounded by the uninhabited earth and the vast emptiness of the sky, who can sit staring at the hand she has been dealt and weather the cold, howling wind that serves to remind her of how alone she is, who can sit alone but not lonely.

Steve finds himself to be suddenly, wildly jealous of Barb for reasons he cannot fathom until, in the blink of an eye, she disappears.

“Where did she go?” Steve asks in startlement. Nancy whips around to stare out at the pool area, where the diving board sits empty, and the shadows that scrape their way across the ground are far from human.

“I don’t know,” Nancy replies, rushing toward the sliding doors that lead out to the swimming pool and pushing them open. Steve follows her out, and they scour the property for any sign of Barb. They call her name, shouting it out into the heartless darkness that Barb had looked so comfortable in only moments before; there is a moment when Steve and Nancy both go silent for a breathless minute, convinced that someone is calling Nancy’s name, but the sound is little more than an echo, and soon enough, the howling of the wind picks back up and tears apart whatever echoes might be threading through the air, as well as ripping Barb’s name to shreds the moment it leaves their lips.

Nancy leads him to where Barb parked her car, but she's not there, either, and Nancy assures him that Barb's house is far enough from his that she would never have considered walking, and especially not in wet clothing in the middle of the night in November. They head back to Steve's house, calling Barb's name all the while; the wind calms for a moment, and then their voices are swallowed up by the darkness.

She's nowhere to be found.

"Maybe she slipped inside while we were out looking for her?" Steve suggests doubtfully as he and Nancy walk up the driveway. He can tell that she thinks it's highly unlikely, but they check anyway. Unsurprisingly, the house is empty except for Steve, Nancy, Tommy, and Carol.

"We should call Hopper," Carol says once Steve and Nancy have managed to explain the situation to her.

"He's going to kill me," Steve moans in realization.

Nancy says, sympathetically, "It's not your fault Barb's gone missing, Steve."

"No, I know," he replies, "but the *beers*."

Carol groans and shakes her head, saying, "You *idiot*."

"Barb is *missing*," Nancy snaps, "and you're worried about Hopper finding out about the *beers* we drank? *Really?*"

Steve sighs in exasperation. "Among other things, yeah. *Obviously* Barb missing is the biggest problem, but the involvement of alcohol isn't exactly ideal, Nance. I'm not saying that the beer is my most pressing concern, I'm just saying that Hopper's gonna kill me when he finds out."

"He'll kill all of us," Tommy corrects, "but at least we'll be able to find Barb."

"Yeah, okay," Steve says, and calls Hopper, who sounds extremely irritated at being woken up. "He'll be here in a few," Steve tells his

friends dutifully, and moves into the living room, where he sinks into the corner of the couch closest to the window to wait.

He guesses that maybe Will Byers didn't run away after all, if Barb's gone and disappeared into thin air.

Their table at lunch the next day is awkward and silent; they're surrounded by people, but it seems like only Steve, Nancy, Tommy, and Carol truly understand that there's something *wrong*. The four of them are alone in a crowd, and all Steve can think is that he's glad he's got his friends with him in this fucked up situation where kids disappear in the middle of the night, leaving only a few drops of blood or (according to Hopper) a loaded gun and an overturned box of ammo behind.

Steve kind of feels like his entire life's been turned upside-down: before Sunday night, he lived in small-town Hawkins, where no one ever hears about anything happening, and then, within forty-eight hours, the youngest child of the town's resident weirdo goes missing, and a high schooler disappears into thin air only two days later.

The thing is, Steve is probably one of the only ones who knows how fucked up Hawkins actually is – he lived it, after all; he grew up in the lab that lurks ominously at the edge of town – and this is still far beyond the realm of belief. This is *Hawkins*. Nothing ever happens here: no murders, no suicides, no children going missing. There's no coke circulating through the parties high schoolers throw; there're only the beers and kegs and liquor cabinets hidden in the dark corners of parents' offices; there're only cigarettes and, occasionally, hashish. Hell, in this town, there's not even petty theft.

Hawkins is a slow, sleepy town, where everybody knows everybody without *actually* knowing anything about anyone. All the crime is relegated to the mysterious lab that's so far away from town that people forget it's part of the town, and *no one* knows about anything that happens there.

This: a missing kid, and a suicide, and a girl disappearing into thin air? This shit never happens, because Hawkins is so *painfully* normal that no one thinks to look past the thin veil that hides the more

sinister parts of town.

This is a town, Steve knows, where, for the most part, there are no new arrivals, where the men take up jobs at the tiny police department, or at the town hall, or in one of the businesses just outside of town; where the women are doctors or nurses at the Hawkins Memorial Hospital, or standing behind a counter at Melvald's, or Bradley's Big Buy, or Family Video; where the women marry the men with the biggest salary, and they buy houses in the middle of town, and they have their two point five kids, and their white picket fences, and their Reagan signs in the front lawn preceding the election.

This is not a town where little boys and girls grow up in a liberally windowed lab, surrounded by dangerously genial men and women who are there to train children to use their powers, except it is. This is not a town where parents beat on co-parents and children, except it is. This is not a town where perfectly content people kill themselves, except it is. This is not a town where abused children run away years after the abuser is gone, where girls with friends vanish without a trace, where anything *happens*, except it is.

This is a town, Steve decides during sixth period English, where the sinister things that happen are buried deep beneath the stifling normalcy everyone works so hard to maintain. This is a town, he reiterates during last period gym, where the things that happen are so far removed from the general public that no one *has* to turn a blind eye; those things are hidden behind thick, impenetrable walls, and there is not a sight nor a sound that ever manages to break through.

This is a normal town only because everything deep and dark and disturbing is buried so deep that it never sees the light of day.

“You’ve been real quiet today,” Carol says, cracking her gum. She’s leaning against the side of Elda’s old Beemer and looking at where Steve’s perched on the hood, debating if he wants a cigarette. He remembers Nancy crinkling her nose at the smell of the smoke and decides against it.

“Been thinking,” Steve replies, leaning back on his palms and watching the doors of the school. Tommy’s almost reached them, and

Nancy is making her way toward them.

“About what?” Carol’s voice is only mildly curious, the way it always is when she’s interested in what he has to say but doesn’t want to make him feel self-conscious.

“How normal Hawkins always seems,” Steve says slowly, trying to order his thoughts into something comprehensive. “It’s like... nothing ever seems to happen here, y’know? I mean, nothing *interesting*. We don’t normally have missing kids, or suicides, or anything that other towns or cities have.”

“Mm-hm,” Carol prompts, blowing another bubble and popping it with her teeth.

“There’s the lab on the edge of town,” he continues. “Obviously, no one outside really knows what’s going on in there, but if you think about it... there’s missing kids from somewhere there, and those kids have powers, y’know, and I was thinking... well. What if the lab has something to do with Will and Barb’s disappearance?”

“You think someone at the lab might’ve taken them?”

“Maybe,” Steve says cautiously.

“Why would the lab have taken Will and Barb?” she asks thoughtfully. “Is there something special about them? And if there is, why didn’t they take you, too?”

“I don’t know,” Steve admits, just as Nancy and Tommy reach them.

“Hey, Carol,” another voice says, and the four of them turn to see Nicole, a pretty red head. The only thing Steve’s bothered to learn about her is that she likes photography; she’s never really given him any sign that there’s anything else interesting to know.

“Nicole,” Carol says flatly, her face smoothing out into a bitchy expression. “What’s up?”

“I was in the dark room with Jonathan Byers,” Nicole says, an unattractive smirk twisting her face, “and he was hanging up some interesting photos of you four and Barbara Holland to dry.”

Steve isn't exactly pleased to hear that Byers has been taking pictures of him and his friends without their knowledge, but he's seen the missing poster of Will; he knows that Jonathan took the picture that he's been hanging up around town, and his second thought is that maybe, if Byers was there last night, Jonathan saw something. (His first thought is more a feeling: a sudden urge to break Jonathan's camera so that he never takes pictures of someone without their permission again, but he quells it for the time being.)

"Thanks for telling us, Nicole," Carol tells the other girl in her customary dead tone. "We'll take care of it. Run along now." She pops another bubble and makes a condescending shooing motion with her hand. Nicole scowls and leaves.

"D'you think Jonathan saw anything?" Steve asks once she's out of earshot. "Maybe he got a picture of when Barb disappeared."

Nancy's eyes light up. "Maybe he did! Look, he's right there. Let's ask." She raises her voice enough for Jonathan to hear her. "Hey, Jonathan! C'mere for a sec."

He gives them a wary glance, his shoulders curling in like he's trying to make himself small enough that they can't see him, but he walks over to them, his knuckles tight around the strap of his bag and his camera held tight against his chest.

"Nicole just told us that you have some pictures of us from last night," Steve begins, and, seeing the panicked look crossing Jonathan's face adds, "and we were wondering if you got any of Barb. She disappeared last night, and we thought you might've caught it one camera."

The expression that settles on Jonathan's face is startled, but he nods. "I got some pictures when she was on the diving board after the rest of you'd gone inside," he offers, reaching in his bag and withdrawing a sheath of glossy photos.

He starts flipping through them, and Steve scowls when he sees one of Nancy, framed by his bedroom window and her back to the camera, in just her bra. Jonathan flips past that one extra quickly, focusing intensely on the images in his hands. Steve can't help but

feel satisfied that Jonathan is at least aware that he comes across as a creep, but that thought is quickly shuffled out of his mind when careful hands lay out a series of photos on the hood of the car. Steve slides off to make more room for the candids, and Jonathan steps back from the car so that the rest of them can crowd around the photos.

There are only four photos, but all of them are focused on Barb. There is one of her with a can of beer and a knife in her hand; everyone else is present in the image, but they're blurred and obviously not the intended subject.

The next is of Barb on Steve's shoulders just before Nancy falls off Tommy's into the pool; a blurry Carol is in the background, leaning against the side of the pool, and both she and Barb have their heads thrown back in laughter.

The last two photos are of Barb sitting on the diving board; she is lit from the far side by the house lights, and from below by the glow of the pool, which seems far less eerie in black and white than it did when Steve was seeing it in full color.

The first of the diving board photos has Barb looking up at the sky; the lighting gives her jaw an unusually sharp cast against the elegant curve of her neck as her head cranes back. The toes of her shoes are just barely skimming the surface of the water, and it reminds Steve that she was tall for a girl. Around her, there are the same grasping trees that have decorated Steve's yard since long before he lived there. The way she is positioned, Barb looks as though the trees are a part of her; she looks as though she is holding up the dome of the sky.

The photo reminds Steve of how Barb had looked last night, when he saw her for the first time: she is alone in the image; the space around her is devoid of other humans, and yet she looks calm, like she is at home amongst the trees that help her lift up the sky.

The last photo is wildly different than all the others. Instead of looking up, like she is admiring whatever stars were dappling the night, Barb is looking down at her hands. She is still surrounded by trees, but they are no longer supporting the atmosphere. Most

importantly, in this photo, she is not alone. There is a creature behind her; a thin, spindly thing that towers above her and dwarfs her. For the first time since Steve finally saw who Barb is, she looks small; for the first time, in the face of a monster she cannot see, she looks *lonely*.

“There,” Nancy says, breaking the breathless silence that has engulfed the five of them; she points down at the creature lurking in the shadows behind Barb. “Would you be able to get a clearer picture of that?” she asks Jonathan.

He looks startled at the question and stares at Nancy with wide eyes before mumbling something in the affirmative that includes far too many photography-related phrases for Steve to follow. They head back to the school in a tight cluster; Nancy and Jonathan head into the darkroom, and Steve, Tommy, and Carol wait outside. Steve wonders what the photo will show them.

“He likes her,” Tommy tells him. “Are you gonna be okay with that?”

Steve scowls, knowing that both Tommy and Carol are very familiar with how jealously he guards the people closest to him. He takes a deep breath. “She likes him too, so I’ll have to be, won’t I.” It’s not a question, it’s just something he has to keep in mind if he wants to be anything to Nancy.

“Aw, Steve, you’re growing up,” Carol says, laughing.

Steve scowls at her. “I just... I want what you guys have; you know? I mean, you guys have sex, and you like it, and I kinda wish I had that aspect of your relationship? But also, I just want the emotional aspect. I see you two together, and you’re so comfortable with each other. You know everything about each other, all the minefields and desires, and I feel like having *that* aspect would make the sex part better?”

Tommy gives him a confused look. “You don’t like having sex? You’re with a new girl every week, and they all talk about how good you are. I kinda assumed you were having a good time.”

“I don’t mind it,” Steve asserts, “It’s fine. But I never really *liked* any

of those girls; I think I really like Nancy, and I *feel* like that would make the difference.”

“Huh,” Carol says thoughtfully. She looks over her shoulder to make sure no one is around and lowers her voice. “What about when you... y’know. Kissed Tommy?”

“That was nice,” Steve agrees.

“Nice!” Tommy squawks. “I’m a good kisser and you know it!”

“But I like Tommy better than all the girls I’m with,” he continues, ignoring his friend.

“Okay,” Carol mutters, “Have you considered that maybe you like... boys, and not girls?”

Steve twists his face thoughtfully. “Boys are attractive enough, but so are girls. Tommy’s the only boy I’ve ever wanted to kiss, and Nancy’s the only girl I’ve ever wanted to do more... more than sex with, I guess.”

“Really?” Nancy’s voice says from behind them; he turns to look at where she and Jonathan are coming out of the darkroom. She looks vaguely surprised, and Steve wonders how much she overheard. There’s no disgust on her face, so she probably didn’t hear the part about him kissing Tommy; he finds himself relieved by that.

“Yeah,” he replies, shrugging his shoulders. “Anyways, did you guys get a better image of the thing that was behind Barb?”

“We did,” Nancy grins, and brandishes a glossy photo whose subject is tall and emaciated and, oddly, has no face.

Tommy and Carol lean closer to the photo. It is Tommy who asks, with a sort of disgusted fascination, “Where’s its face?”

Jonathan shrugs, and Nancy’s face tells them that she has no idea either.

“We should bring this to Hopper,” Steve says. “Maybe he’ll be able to figure it out. Tommy and Carol are riding with me. Nance, do you

wanna come with, or d'you wanna go with Jonathan and meet us at the station?"

"I'll ride with Jonathan," she replies after a moment's contemplation. Steve smiles at her and leans down to kiss her cheek.

"We'll see you there, then," Steve tells them agreeably. Nancy and Jonathan break off to walk over to his car, and Steve adds, just loud enough for them to hear, "Hey, Jonathan?"

"Yeah?" Jonathan looks faintly exasperated, like he expects Steve to tell him to stay away from Nancy. Steve smiles amusedly; maybe in some other life, but if there is one thing he's learned after growing up with Kali and, later, Carol, it's that girls are capable of taking care of themselves; he's sure that Nancy wouldn't appreciate him warning Jonathan away unless she asked him to. "Don't take photos of me without my permission," he says, his voice hard and unforgiving, "or I'll break your camera."

"Yeah, okay," Jonathan agrees, raising his camera to his face, as though he's about to snap a photo; but he lowers it and quirks a smile at Steve. "I'll ask the next time I want a picture of you."

Steve sneers at him before turning and making his way to the Beemer, where Tommy and Carol are already waiting inside.

"Your mother," Hopper tells Jonathan grumpily, "has been calling non-stop about *everything*. First it was the phone calls, then she said that the lights were talking to her, and now she's talking about faceless monsters crawling outta the walls. And you know what? I coulda dismissed it – people get prank calls all the time; sometimes lights flicker; sometimes grief does strange things to a person's mind.

"But then you kids come in here not even a day after calling to let me know that Barb Holland disappeared into thin air, and now you've got fuckin' photographic evidence, and it's a photo of a faceless monster that none of you saw with your own eyes, but now Joyce is seeming less and less like she's a crazy person, which means that I actually have to take into account all the bizarre happenings she keeps calling about, which means *you five* are making my job harder

than it needs to be.” He shakes his head. “Why couldn’t this have happened in someone else’s town?”

“Because other towns don’t have creepy labs that steal superpowered children and experiment on them,” Steve mutters.

Hopper gives him a sharp look. “You think the lab has something to do with this?”

“Maybe,” he agrees, not looking at Jonathan and Nancy and lowering his voice before he continues. “I don’t know for sure, but... think about it. I can make people do things; Kali could make people see things; I don’t know what Eleven could do, and I don’t really remember any of the others, but they could do *something*. It’s not outside the realm of possibility.”

“And,” Carol adds, “you were wondering, earlier, if maybe Barb and Will could do things, too. We don’t know that they couldn’t; no one would have guessed you could if you hadn’t said something.”

“I don’t think Will has powers,” Jonathan offers quietly. “I grew up with him; I think I would’ve noticed.”

Nancy shrugs beside him. “I don’t know if Barb could do anything; she never told me, but she was also never very good at keeping secrets, so...” she trails off. “I don’t know,” she repeats, “but I don’t think so. Maybe we’re missing something.”

Someone from State finds Will Byers’ body in the quarry; Joyce is not the only one who doesn’t believe it, not when the rest of them know that monsters exist, not when the truth about Hawkins Lab is slowly coming out.

It’s not just Joyce: Hopper doesn’t believe it, not with photographic evidence of a creature sneaking up on Barb and Joyce’s assertions that she was talking to Will at the same time he was found. Steve and Nancy, Tommy, Carol, and Jonathan don’t believe it because, as Nancy and Carol say time and time again, it’s too convenient for a body to show up in the quarry just after they’ve begun to suspect the lab.

Hopper jokes that they're as bad as Murray Bauman with their conspiracy theories, and they all turn dead-eyed stares in his direction. "Don't act like you don't think the same things we do," Steve says, and Hop scrubs a hand over his eyes and slouches down in the uncomfortable wooden chair at Joyce's kitchen table.

So none of them believe it, but they still have to go on like everything is exactly as it seems: Joyce takes another day off from work and starts to plan a funeral for the child everyone believes is dead; Jonathan heads over to the funeral parlor after identifying the body to look at coffins he can't afford; Steve, Nancy, Tommy, and Carol go to school and do their work and sit quietly at the table in the cafeteria where there are so many ears that don't hear a thing they say.

After school, they meet up with Jonathan, and they go exploring in the woods.

Nancy is swallowed by a tree, and Steve follows her, trying not to think about it is him leaving Tommy and Carol – and Jonathan, now – behind, and not the other way around.

All's well that ends well, though; Steve and Nancy follow their friends' voices back into their own world, and while Steve knows that he, at least, will be having nightmares for months, they're safe for the moment, *and* they know how to attract the monsters.

In the end, Steve hates almost everything having to do with Hawkins. He thinks he's allowed, after learning that the people responsible for El making contact and opening the Gate are also, in a round-about way, responsible for Barb's death.

The lab is to blame for a great many things, and while Steve is sure that he has a more intimate understanding of their crimes than most, he is aware that he doesn't know everything.

What he does know is this: because of the lab, Will disappeared for a week, give or take a few days, and came back wan and pale and sickly, and only came back at all because of Joyce and Hopper's persistence; Barb is gone; *El* is gone. The Gate is still open, and the

Upside Down is still festering beneath Hawkins' surface, and while almost everything is back to normal, everything is also worse than it was before.

Because he also knows this: through a long chain of events, the lab is responsible for the scars that bisect Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan's palms; for the nightmares suffered by the adults and teens and kids alike; for their collective fear of what's hiding in the darkness; for the way Steve keeps Nancy's nail bat with him at all times, and how Nancy has a loaded gun in both his and Jonathan's cars and an unloaded one in her purse alongside a full magazine, and the way Jonathan stockpiles lighters in various nooks and crannies, and bear traps lie in wait in the trunk of his car.

Steve likes to joke that the lab is responsible for their massive electricity bills, too, but he figures it's too much to ask them to cover those when they're already covering Will's medical and psych bills.

There are things he refuses to give Hawkins Lab credit for, though; they are to blame for everything that has been stolen from him and his friends. They're to blame for his lack of a childhood, for the parents he never knew, for the people they've taken, and the peace of mind that's been robbed from them. With all that on their résumé, Steve can't bring himself to think charitably of the way the circumstances created by the lab have brought him and Carol and Tommy closer, or the way he and Nancy stepped smoothly out of whatever was building between them to form a solid friendship, or the way she and Jonathan have taken their place in his group of friends.

The five of them have an inexplicable friendship borne out of the confusion surrounding the Byers family, and that air of mystery has only cemented their place in school.

Steve has come to appreciate the title that was forced on him as a freshman: he and those he befriends are respected, and they are left alone more often than not. It offers him a sort of control over the world he lives in that the lab and the Upside Down stripped away, and so while the lab is technically responsible for that, too, he refuses to acknowledge it.

6. Hera

Summary for the Chapter:

Hera is the goddess of women, marriage, family and childbirth in ancient Greek religion and mythology...

“Eleven is alive,” Hopper tells him the day after Christmas. “I thought you’d like to come meet her for real.”

“Sure,” Steve agrees, grabbing his winter coat. “Will anyone else be there?”

“Just us,” Hopper says forbiddingly. “And if I find out that you told anyone she was alive or where she was, I’ll put myself in charge of the murder investigation that will never find your body, got it?”

“Jesus, Hop, I won’t tell anyone. But it’s funny that you think I wouldn’t make you leave me alone.”

Hopper rolls his eyes. “I’d do it while you were asleep, obviously.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Steve argues, sliding into the passenger seat of Hopper’s car. “Because I’d make it so that you’d never even consider it beforehand. Don’t forget, man. I’ve got powers and I’m not afraid to use them.”

Hop smiles at him fondly. “Yeah, you are,” he says quietly.

Steve swallows, feeling a little too seen. “I’m not,” he denies vehemently, but he knows that Hopper can hear the lie.

“You’re afraid they won’t work if you *do* use them,” Hopper tells him, “because they’ve failed you when you needed them most.”

Steve presses his lips together and stares blindly out the window. Snow-covered trees slide by, shoving the town further and further behind them, until he can no longer see its remains.

From far away, just before it slips out of view, Hawkins looks like a ghost town. Steve wonders if Barb and Elda and everyone else who's ever died there are still wandering around, their spirits walking the streets before they disappear without leaving footprints behind.

"Yeah," he finally agrees. Hopper's *right*, after all. Steve is afraid, and he hates that about himself. He's an adult tomorrow, and adults are supposed to be strong and fearless, and Steve is... *not*. He's just a kid with finnicky powers who's terrified of the world and the things he knows prowl around in the dark. He can fight Demogorgons with his nail bat, but sometimes the real monsters are human, and he doesn't know how to fight them in the event that his voice fails him.

"We're here," Hopper says. "And kid?"

"What's up?"

"It's okay to be afraid of people and monsters and the dark. I am too."

"No, you aren't," he scoffs, disbelieving.

"I used to be, when I was your age," Hopper says softly. "Now c'mon. Let's go see El."

Steve follows him into the woods, which are as snow-covered as the road, and boast an eerie sort of stillness. It reminds him of when Elda read him *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The harsh, unforgiving winter; a Christmas where someone important is missing; a powerful being on the other side. "If El is Aslan and you're Mr Tumnus, am I Lucy Pevensie?" he asks. Hopper frowns at him before knocking on the cabin door with a specific rhythm. Locks and bolts click and metal scrapes against metal on the other side. The door swings open.

"You could pass for a little girl, but I am not half goat, Harrington," Hopper growls, and stalks inside. Steve follows him, shutting the door behind himself, and comes face to face with a small girl with short hair, wide eyes, and a blank expression on her face.

"Hi, Eleven," Steve says, holding his hand out to her. She looks at it

blankly before returning her attention to his face. Steve's arm falls back to his side. "I'm Seven. I haven't seen you in years."

Steve has been trying, over the past few months, to convince Hopper that allowing the others to know about El can only be a good thing. "Brenner's gone," he points out, "and El killed all his lackeys that night at the middle school."

"Yeah, 'cause Brenner made me give up her location so that we could get to Will. He's dangerous, kid. He'd do anything to get his hands on her again."

"He's dead!"

"He's disappeared. We don't *know* that he's dead, and until I see the body proving he's dead, El isn't going anywhere."

Clearly, the warmer spring weather isn't doing anything to thaw Hopper out. It seems a shame to Steve that El has to stay inside now that the snow has melted, and the sun has started staying out longer to caress the tiny leaves that have begun sprouting out of the tree branches.

"You've said yourself that Doc Owens seems like a decent dude," Steve tries a few days later as he walks past Hopper and into the cabin. El is sitting in front of the tv, watching something atrocious.

"Not happening!" Hopper shouts, closing the door and stomping down the steps.

"He isn't budging," Steve grumbles to El, dumping his backpack on the floor in front of him.

"Keep trying," she tells him, as she has every other time they've had this conversation. She leans forward to unzip the bag and peer inside. "Books," she says, pulling out the stories he'd brought. "Crayons," follows, "paper."

El frowns at the items at the bottom of the bag. Nancy and Carol had lent him some makeup and nail polish without any questions, though Steve is not operating under any illusions: the only reason they didn't

ask is because every other time he's had an odd request, their curiosity had garnered no answers. They'll try to catch him off guard and trick him into an answer, but for now El's survival is still a well-kept secret.

"It's makeup and nail polish," he tells El. "People use it to look pretty," he adds.

"Pretty," she repeats, and pulls the items out. She lines them up on the coffee table in front of the couch. "Make me pretty?"

Steve smiles. "You're already pretty, El. And I don't really know how to use this stuff, but it'll still be fun."

She grins back at him. "You are pretty, too."

"Boys aren't pretty, El, they're handsome."

El shakes her head. "You are pretty. *Mike* is prettiest. But boys are pretty." She picks up one of the palettes and places it in his hand. "Make me pretty, then I will make you pretty."

He looks down at the makeup he's holding. He's got no clue what it is or where it goes, but El is looking at him with her huge, dark eyes, and he can't help but give in. "I thought I was the one with powers of persuasion," he complains, opening the container and swiping the stick inside across the powdery pink stuff. He thinks it might be eyeshadow, and even if it isn't, that's what he'll be using it for. "Close your eyes," he tells El, reaching towards her face slowly.

Her eyelids flutter shut, and he smears pink all over them. He closes the palette and pulls out maybe-rouge that gets dusted onto her cheeks. Next is something that is definitely lipstick, but Steve can't get the bright red pigment to stay within the line of El's lips. By the time he's gotten to what he assumes is mascara, El looks like a clown. "How do people *do* this?" he mumbles, trying not to laugh at what he's done to El's face. He fails miserably.

El opens her eyes and frowns at him. "What?"

"I've just kinda..." Steve chokes, "screwed up a little. You can mess up my face when you do it, it you want."

She eyes him. “Can I see?”

“I guess,” Steve says, rummaging through their pile of goods for the small mirror he’d brought along. El positions it at different angles in an attempt to see her whole face and laughs when she finally manages it.

“No more makeup for you,” she tells him solemnly. “Mike did a better job.”

“Mike has a sister,” Steve protests. “Nancy and Carol’ve never really done their makeup where I could see.”

“I will do *your* makeup now,” El says, ignoring his pitiful defense. Steve sighs and submits himself to her attempts. Even when she’s putting stuff on his eyes, the whole process is kind of relaxing.

“We should do this again,” he murmurs.

“No talking,” El scolds. “And we will only do your makeup again until you learn how to make me look pretty.”

He hums and lets her finish painting his face. The skin feels heavier than it normally does, and while the process was relaxing, he doesn’t like how it feels after. “My skin is suffocating,” he tells her dramatically, and looks in the mirror. He looks only slightly less clownish than El does, but he figures he can deal with that if doing his makeup makes her happy. “Nails next?”

“Okay,” she agrees suspiciously.

“I’ve done nails before,” he reassures her. “Pick a color.”

She chooses pink and, at his prompting, settles her hand on his knee. Steve unscrews the lid, wipes the excess polish off the brush, and starts painting her nails.

After, she chooses a book to read aloud while they wait for the polish to dry, and Steve makes them dinner. “We can have Eggos after,” he promises when she frowns at their absence. He scoops peas onto her plate and watches to make sure she eats them; they’d had an incident, a few weeks ago, where he’d made peas and she’d dumped

them on the floor beneath the table when he wasn't looking. The argument that had followed hadn't been a nice one, but though El had told him in no uncertain terms to "Go away," he'd been back the next day.

That seems to be their relationship, though: he does something that triggers an unfamiliar emotion; she tells him to leave; he leaves. He comes back, though.

(*"You came back?" El had asked, her eyes wide with surprise, wide enough to hold the tears threatening to spill out.*

"I never left," he'd replied.)

He'll always come back.

"Hey, kid," Hopper's voice says through the phone. "I've got something I need to do. Will you come over for me?"

"Sure," Steve agrees. He grabs his keys from the kitchen counter. "I'm on my way now. Be there in fifteen."

"Thanks." Hopper hangs up. Steve wonders what's happening; it's either something to do with Will, or someone has come to the station with something more complex than a broken flowerpot and a missing spare key, which is unlikely; Hawkins and its residents are often safely inside their homes after dark. Steve knows, from Hopper's daily rants, that Officers Callahan and Powell aren't exactly the most competent people in the world, so if it is some sort of crime, he'll probably hear about it by breakfast tomorrow.

In the end, though, it isn't really his business either way; if there's anything serious going on with Will, he and everyone else will be informed at dinner on Friday night so that everything Upside Down related will be out of the way in time for the kids' weekend-ly Dipshits and Devils (or whatever it's called) marathon.

Now that school's officially out, they'll probably be extending their game into the week as well; Steve doesn't particularly care, so long as they don't try to drag him into it. He, Nancy, Jonathan, Carol, and

Tommy have their movie nights after the dinners on Fridays, so he can at least say that he's got plans if the kids corner him. If they corner any of the others, and Carol especially, the five of them will be taking part in whatever D & D mission the kids've concocted.

For now, though, Steve has to think about what he's going to do to entertain El. Hopper makes an effort not to spring babysitting duty on him unexpectedly because Steve never gets a chance to bring games or books or movies for El when he does. He'll figure something out, of course, but unplanned-for occurrences are obnoxious. He should probably just keep a bag of stuff for El in his car for when things like this happen.

By the time Steve arrives at the cabin, Hopper is gone and El is waiting, scowling, at the door.

“Whoa, dude, what’s wrong?”

“He left,” she says flatly, and turns to walk toward the couch. The door slams shut behind Steve, and he jumps.

“Hey, calm down,” he tells her placatingly. “You know he wouldn’t leave without a good reason, alright? He’ll be back soon; you won’t even notice how long he’s been gone.”

“Liar!” she rages. “You say that *every* time. ‘Do not worry, El, he will be back *soon*. Do not worry. You will not even *realize* he has been *gone*.’ I *always* notice and you always tell the same lies because *you* are *stupid*. We are *notfriends* because friends don’t *lie*.”

Steve sinks onto the couch, feeling like she’s punched him in the stomach. He chews at the inside of his cheek and takes a deep breath. “Eleven, you need to calm down.”

“I am calm, Seven!” she shrieks, flinging an arm out. One of the lamps from the corner flies across the room and hits the opposite wall. It falls to the floor in a twisted mess of metal and shattered glass. The outlet it was plugged into has been ripped out of the wall, and the room is noticeably darker.

“Did that make you feel better?” Steve asks, his voice low.

“No,” comes the mutinous reply, but her slender form is slumped on the couch and her arms are crossed against her chest; he thinks that, at the very least, she’s done tossing things around the room.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he ventures. “Or do you want to clean up, first?”

“Neither” she snarls, hunching into herself. Steve is reminded abruptly of a wild animal.

“If you don’t want to talk, and you don’t want to clean up, then you’ll listen to what I have to say, and *then* you’ll talk – if you have anything to add – and we’ll clean up.” He sees the expression on her face and adds, “You can listen willingly, or I can *make* you listen. It’s your choice.”

“Fine.”

“Okay.” He takes another breath. “El, I get that you’re angry, and that’s okay. You’re allowed to be angry sometimes. But you can’t just go around hurting people because you’re angry, and you can’t throw things, either, okay?”

“I didn’t *hurt* anyone,” she says, her eyebrows lifting in offense.

Steve tilts his head. “There are different ways to hurt people.” Her face is still tense when he looks at her, but her shoulders are no longer up by her ears, and her arms are around her knees, now. It’s progress. “You can kill someone, and that’s hurting them.”

El opens her mouth to protest. “You shouldn’t kill people,” he says assertively, “unless it is absolutely necessary, and you’re sure that there is no other option, because killing people is generally considered to be bad.”

She nods reluctantly, and so he continues. “If you throw someone through the air, like you did with that lamp, that’s hurting them. Sometimes, breaking a person’s belongings might hurt them.” He leans forward, like he has something important to say, and she mimics him. “I know for a fact, though, that Hopper doesn’t like that lamp. Just don’t do it again, alright?”

“Yes,” she agrees, and falls silent again.

“You can also,” he says carefully, “hurt people with words. So you shouldn’t call people mean names because that might hurt their feelings, and you especially shouldn’t do it when you’re angry, because you might regret it later.”

“Did I... hurt you?”

“A little,” Steve tells her, because she has made her feelings on lies very clear.

“Sorry,” she whispers, scooting towards him.

He wraps an arm around her shoulders and pulls her against his side. “I forgive you, kiddo. I remember this part of learning how to be a person.”

“Being a real person is *hard*,” she informs him, pressing the words into his shoulder.

“Yeah it is,” he chuckles. “One of the hardest things I ever did.”

“What’s the hardest?” she wonders.

Forgive and forget is what he wants to say, but there’s a story there that she never needs to hear, and he’s never really forgiven and forgotten, anyways. “Seeing my friends with their parents and knowing that I’ll never have that.”

“You don’t have a Mama either?”

“I’m sure I had a mom and a dad once, before the lab took me away. But I wasn’t like Kali. I never remembered anything other than the lab.”

She sighs. “I want a Mama.”

“I’m sure she’s out there somewhere, missing you.”

El shakes her head. “I asked. Hop said she wasn’t.”

Steve frowns, but shakes her words off. “Do you want to watch a movie?”

“Okay,” she agrees, and looks around them. “But I should clean up my mess, first.”

He bites back a smile. “You want my help?”

“No. I broke it; it is my job to fix it.”

Steve settles back on the couch and watches her work. When she finishes, they push the couch back away from the tv – because Steve wants to lay down, and the couch isn’t big enough for both of them if he does so – and El goes into her room to bring blankets and pillows out for them to lay on. Steve makes them popcorn and hot chocolate and sets everything on a pile of books. He helps El spread the blankets out on the floor, and as he’s doing so, he notices an odd seam in the floorboards.

“Hold up, El. What’s under here?” he asks, gesturing at what is distinctly a trap door in the cabin floor.

“I don’t know,” she frowns. “Can we open it?”

Steve snorts. “I like how you ask that like you won’t open it even if I say no. I’m onto you, kiddo.” He figures it’s better that she opens it with him here than if she opens it alone. “Yeah, sure. We can open it.”

So they do, and Steve is vaguely disappointed to see that the room beneath the cabin is full of cardboard boxes. He was expecting something more impressive, given the fact that Hopper’s never told him or El about it.

He’s disappointed until El points out one box in the dozens piled in the room. It, like all the others, is labelled in red Sharpie, and Steve understands immediately why it drew her attention.

The lettering reads, with a great deal of effort on Steve’s part, *Hawkins Lab.*

As former residents of that esteemed, Demogorgon-infested place,

Steve and El find themselves unable to resist temptation. Steve drops down and hands the box up to El before hauling himself back up. They close the trap door again.

It is El who lifts the lid off the box. Inside are dozens of files, and Steve groans. “You read and I’ll listen,” he suggests. “It’ll be good practice.”

She pulls out the first file. “James Allen,” she says, and flips it open. Inside are several sheafs of paper; they are paper clipped together, with a photo of a young boy with fair hair on the top. His file is succeeded by “Mary Anderson, Margaret Day, William Highland,” and various other names that blur together until El says, “Kali Prasad.”

“What file number is that?” Steve demands, wondering if it could possibly be this easy.

“Eight,” El tells him.

“Kali was Eight!” he exclaims. “Who was file number seven?”

“Cristiano Romano,” she replies, holding it out to him. Inside are bits of newspapers clipped together. There’s no photo of the child, but there is one of the parents. El reads the topmost article to him, and Steve can’t help but feel kind of excited about how much of the information fits him. Male, born around Christmas in 1966. Nationality is Italian, but Steve supposes that it’s not out of the realm of possibility; Kali can’t have been the only one from a country other than the US. It’s the photo of the parents that really captures his attention, though. He squints at it. They look kind of like him, he thinks, and when he voices this opinion to El, she agrees. “Valentina De Luca and Alessandro Romano,” she says. “Maybe they are your Mama and Papa?”

“Maybe,” Steve agrees. “D’you want to check out the eleventh one, though?”

“Yes,” is the firm reply. “Jane Ives. Daughter of Terry Ives. Terry Ives took part in MK Ultra experiments at Hawkins Lab. Mama?” She looks at him hopefully.

“Could be,” he says, equally hopeful. “We’ll have to ask Hopper to make sure, though.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” he agrees. “Now let’s put files seven, eight, and eleven in your room and put the box back down there, yeah? And then we can warm up our hot chocolate and watch our movie and pretend that cold popcorn is good.”

El complies, lifting the trapdoor again and handing Steve the box once he gets down. She disappears to her room in the time it takes him to get back out and put the door back down. While he reheats their drinks, El smooths out the blankets and loads *The Outsiders* into the VCR. She falls asleep halfway through, having long since finished her popcorn and hot chocolate, and Steve carries her into her room and dumps her blankets on top of her. He puts the furniture back in its place and watches the rest of the movie while waiting for Hopper to get back.

Two days later, El isn’t talking to Hopper, apparently. To be honest, though, Steve isn’t feeling much like talking to him, either, after they’d confronted him with the files and gotten confirmation that Eleven is, in fact, Jane Ives.

The only reason Steve is talking to Hopper is because he hadn’t known for sure if Steve was actually Cristiano Romano.

But El and Hop aren’t speaking, so Steve gets the dubious honor of being the go-between. El is hostile and Hopper is just miserable and apologetic. He’s the picture of a concerned dad, really, and Steve feels kind of bad for him.

He doesn’t feel bad enough to tell El off for using her powers to find their families, though. And anyways, it’s not like Hopper’ll ever find out. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

What he doesn’t know turns out to be this: Steve and El leave town to visit Terry Ives. Hopper isn’t even an obstacle that day: he gets called into work, and so El and Steve get into his car and drive away from

Hawkins.

Of course, it isn't only Hopper that doesn't know things. Neither Steve nor El were aware that Terry is literally out of her mind. As in, the mind is there, and Terry is not.

Steve adds this to the list of things he knows about the lab: because of it, El's real mother possesses about as much mental acuity as a vegetable.

Somehow, though, despite that roadblock, El manages to get something out of their visit besides a concerned aunt.

When she emerges from behind her blindfold with a bloody nose, her face is determined. She has just come out of what Steve knows is a draining endeavor for her, even though he has only seen her do it one other time, when she was looking for Will and Barb last November, but she is still standing, still ready to carry out her mother's wish.

Steve kinda wishes that he had that sort of loyalty in him, but if he's learned anything about the people who've lived through the terrors of the Upside Down, it's that they've all got something going for them. El's got her unwavering loyalty, Mike's got faith; Lucas has his moral compass and Dustin's got the fear that makes him brave. Nancy's got killer aim and a spine of steel; Jonathan can mold his emotions into weapons; Carol's got brains and Tommy's got instinct. Hopper's got common sense that comes from his experience; Joyce has heart; Will's got will.

They've all got something – for El, it's loyalty.

She and Steve extend their road trip, and Steve tries not to think about how Hopper's going to absolutely *murder* him when they get back. He gets what Hop's doing; Elda did the same thing back when they first escaped the lab. But Elda also allowed Steve these moments of recklessness in between the days and months of unforgiving regimes; Hopper hasn't allowed El to have that, and Steve *gets it*.

But he also thinks that with his and El's powers, and his bat, a little risk isn't the worst thing in the world.

So they extend the road trip, and El tracks Kali down, and it's a kick in the gut to see her again. She looks good, but it's obvious from the way she looks at them that she doesn't recognize them right away.

"Hey, Kali," Steve says. He is standing beside El, who seems unable to keep herself from staring at Kali. She never looked at him like that, and Steve wonders if it's because Kali was her mother's recommendation, or if it's because Kali is both a girl and very clearly a complete badass.

He thinks it's probably the latter.

"Who are you?" Kali asks suspiciously, her eyes narrowed at them.
"How do you know my name?"

Steve swallows. It hurts more than he expected, and he knows that Kali can feel it. She must have trained her empathy over the years; she wasn't always this attuned to emotions. He holds out his hand in a way that exposes the 007 gracing his wrist. "You told me, years ago," he tells her softly, before remembering, "and then you left."

Her face remains as suspicious as it was when they first introduced themselves. She jerks her chin at El. "And who is this?"

"Jane. Eleven," El says, holding her hand out the same way Steve had.

Kali's eyes widen minutely. "Truly? I thought you had gone when they took you away. It is good to know that one of my siblings has survived the atrocities of the lab."

Steve bites the inside his cheek and offers Kali a tight smile. He puts his hand on El's shoulder. "Why don't you guys catch up?" he suggests. "I'll be by the car when you want me."

"Okay," El grins, before she turns her attention back on Kali, who nods, taking El's hand and guiding her to a different part of the warehouse.

The girls are gone for a while, and Steve spends nearly the entire time sitting in his car, listening to the mixtape he'd made for Elda back when they were going to her appointments together. He'd never

taken the tape out of her car, but he'd only listened to it without her a few times. He wonders about the difference between Kali's reaction to seeing him again and seeing El again, but he can't parse it, and so he ends up spending hours listening to the same tape and wallowing in his confused misery.

There is a knock at the car window. Steve moves his arm away from his face and sits up. El and Kali are standing side by side, and Kali has a determined expression on her face; Steve panics for a second, thinking that Kali's going to try and keep El with her. He really doesn't need to go back to Hawkins – back to *Hopper* – with the news that El's sister decided to keep her on a road trip that *Steve* condoned.

Disregarding his worries, Steve opens the door and steps out of the car. "Can I talk to you?" Kali asks him immediately and doesn't bother waiting for an answer before pulling him away. El stays by the car, watching them for a moment before sliding in and closing the door.

"If this is you wanting to keep El, that's gonna be a solid no," Steve says abruptly, feeling disconcerted by the way Kali is just staring at him now that she's dragged him to where she wants him.

"She said as much," Kali agrees. "But that is not what I wanted to talk to you about. Jane says that you remember me, as I was able to discern upon meeting you."

"I remember you," he confirms.

"Then I have no doubt that you are wondering about how cold I was to you when you arrived. Your emotions told me as much."

Steve doesn't reply. Even if her statement was a question, there would be no use in answering it. Kali already knows how he feels on the subject. She leans back against the wall and folds her arms in front of herself.

"Truth be told, I had no intentions of ever meeting anyone from Hawkins Lab ever again, except to punish those who stole our lives from us. Even before we left the lab, I had every intention of leaving and never returning. The only loose end was Jane, because leaving

you and the others behind? Leaving the scientists and overseers behind? That was my choice. The only one I left behind that was not my own choice was Jane. To see you again was everything I never wanted because we had already parted on my terms. Seeing Jane allows me to take control once again. Her arrival was not on my terms, but her departure will be.”

Steve frowns. Knowing that Kali always intended to leave him behind doesn’t make it any better. But there’s no use in arguing with her. Back when he knew her, Kali didn’t understand things like compromise. She refused to bend, and she refused to break, and while Steve could make her do what he wants, he knows that she would never forgive him. He thinks he’d rather have no sister at all, knowing that she’s out there, than have her and her hatred.

“You’ll help her if she ever needs it?” he asks instead of addressing the things Kali can feel.

“I will.”

“You promise?”

Kali rolls her eyes. “Of course. But if you’re so worried, you could always *make* me.” She bares her teeth at him in an attempt to warn him off. But he already knows that that would be a bad idea.

“I don’t want to make you do anything you don’t want.” He turns, shoving his hands in his pockets, and walks toward the car where El is waiting. He says over his shoulder, “I hope you’ll be happy,” and doesn’t look at her again.

She left him once, and she wants him to leave now. Steve may not be able to read books, but he can read between the lines: he knows where he’s not wanted. He knows who he’s not wanted *by*.

He guesses that older sisters aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.

As expected, Hopper is furious with both of them, but especially Steve. His thunderous voice follows Steve out of the cabin, threatening him with a great many things, all very creative. Steve

supposes that Hop's had a few days to work on his threats, but he can't help feeling a little bitter that he's banned from visiting El for the foreseeable future.

His only consolation is her whispered, "Vernazza, Italy," which follows him out of the cabin and into the chilly winter air.

He books a ticket the next day.

Parents, he decides later, are not as good as they always seem. At least, Valentina De Luca and Alessandro Romano aren't.

He'll grant them this: he went into the situation knowing nothing about them; it never even crossed his mind that maybe they didn't want kids. Maybe they didn't want *him*.

Of course, that wasn't the problem. Nothing in Steve's life is ever so uncomplicated.

This particular problem has two parts.

Part one is Steve himself. Steve flies to Italy above an earth painted with assumptions. He assumes that all parents are like Joyce Byers or Karen Wheeler, Elisa Hagan or Terry Ives or Hopper. He assumes that all parents are the kinds of people who, upon losing a child, would refuse to accept the loss, who would *know*, somehow, that their child was not dead. He thought – after seeing the way Joyce refused to believe that Will was dead, even when she was presented with a body; after hearing about the way Terry refused to give up in her search for her missing daughter, who was so thorough in her search that she found other children and parents who were missing each other, who was so thorough that it took *four-fifty* to shut her down – that his parents must be like his friends' incredible ones. He thought his parents would be the kind of people who would refuse to be shut out, no matter what, or the kind of people who would lose one child just to take in a girl in need of a father years later.

But he forgot about parents like Lonnie Byers, like Ted Wheeler, like Anna and Todd Perkins. He forgot about parents who are cruel, who give up easy, who care more about success than about their kids.

Even so, while his parents don't fit into the former category for him, alongside the incredible parents he's come to know and appreciate and love, they also don't fit into the latter space he has carved out in his head.

And that is the second part of the problem. After spending some time thinking about it, he realizes something. He was taken within a week of his birth – he's not sure of the specific date – and he's eighteen now. Hell, he's been eighteen for months, now. He's been missing for over eighteen years. That's a long time for a person to be missing, and while he likes to think he would wait for his child if they disappeared, no matter how long it took, the truth of the matter is that he'd have assumed that child was dead within a few months, and definitely after years had passed.

And that's the problem. He wants to blame them for not knowing that he was alive all this time, for not knowing that he's been parentless for all these years. But he gets it. They certainly assumed he was dead within five years. Older than that? Forget it.

Here's the thing: Joyce Byers held a certain conviction that her son was alive, but he was talking to her. He was communicating with her, and – Steve doesn't want to diminish Joyce's struggle, because it was and always will be a struggle – he was only missing for a week.

Steve's been gone for nearly two decades, and he's been living under a name that has no hope of being connected to his real name.

So, while it hurts that Valentina and Alessandro have no room for him in their lives, Steve can't bring himself to be angry about it. His parents grieved for him, and then they rebuilt themselves and their family from the ground up. They fought through the pain of losing a child, and they stayed together, and they had more children.

He has siblings by blood, not by circumstance, and he'll never be a part of their lives.

He has parents, and through no fault of his own or their own, he will never be their child again.

He tells himself that it's good that his parents aren't stuck in the past,

that they aren't mourning a lost child, that they haven't thrown away their futures. They are older than when they had him; they've had life thrown at them in many forms and they've weathered the storm.

Realistically, he can't blame them for not wanting to re-live a tragic part of their past. This isn't a fairytale; Steve isn't a Disney princess who gets happily reunited with his parents. He doesn't get the guy, and he's also not the guy who gets the girl.

He, like his parents, has to accept his lot in life. He has to accept what he's lost, and he has to move forward. Steve's been imagining the scenario for years, where he meets his parents and lives happily ever after.

But this is real life, and he's met the parents, and he's finally realized what's been in front of his face this entire time: he's already got a family, and maybe they're not all family by blood, but they've chosen each other, and he thinks maybe that's better.

Some families lose a child, and grieve, and rebuild their lives. Some families find that lost child and other lost children and make them their own.

Some parents lose a child they never get a chance to know. Others get to know children who've been lost and aren't theirs and might as well be.

And Steve, after thinking long and hard about it, wouldn't have it any other way.

7. Deimos

Summary for the Chapter:

Deimos /'daɪmɒs/ (Ancient Greek: Δεῖμος, pronounced [dē:mos], meaning “dread”) is the personal god of dread and terror in Greek mythology. He was a son of Ares and Aphrodite, and the twin brother of Phobos.

Notes for the Chapter:

This covers season two.

The new kid is gorgeous.

Steve sees him for the first time after he pulls into the high school parking lot in his sleek, beautiful, obnoxiously loud car. Nancy looks up from where she's frowning at his lost cause of a college essay to turn her attention in the direction of the unexpectedly loud sound of the Camaro's engine. They watch the guy step out of the car; Steve sees a flash of red out of the corner of his eye, but he's too focused on the boy's form as he turns and walks away.

Steve and Nancy exchange a wide-eyed glance. “Holy shit,” Steve mutters, and Nancy snorts.

“Have fun staring,” she says amusedly. “And don't tell Jonathan I was looking at another guy. He still thinks that I'll change my mind about you sometimes.”

Steve furrows his eyebrows. “Why? He fits better with you than I would have.”

Nancy shrugs her slender shoulders. “I'm not really sure. I think it was because we kind of dated first, and he feels like he doesn't know what he's doing, or because of that time you said I was the only girl you'd ever wanted to kiss.”

“I didn’t know what I was doing either,” Steve says.

“No,” Nancy agrees. “But you know your reputation. It’s not like you’ve ever made much of an effort to disabuse anyone of everything everyone says.”

Steve frowns, feeling like she’s judging him for the stories he does nothing to stop. “I was ashamed, Nance. I’m still ashamed, and everything just piled itself on top. My entire reputation is just a stinking heap of lies born from my humiliation.”

“I wasn’t criticizing you,” Nancy says softly. “I was just saying that you can’t really expect anything different when you’re literally called King Steve. Sure, it’s all hearsay, but that doesn’t mean people don’t believe it. Besides, even without all that, once you kiss enough girls, you’re practically begging for tales of your prowess to circulate.”

“Once enough girls kiss *you*, you mean,” Steve says irritably. “I just go along with it.”

“Yeah,” Nancy sighs. “C’mon, classes are starting soon.” She gives him a sly smile. “Maybe you’ll have a class with the new kid.” And with that, she’s opening the car door, stepping out, and walking away, presumably to find Jonathan. Steve pulls the door shut from the inside before getting out the driver’s side and heading into the school.

By the end of the day, Steve knows that the new kid’s name is Billy Hargrove, he’s a junior, he’s in all the same classes as Nancy Wheeler, and he’s a hot piece of ass. Steve knows he’s got it bad when he catches himself listening to Nicole-From-The-Camera-Incident and Tina-Who’s-Hosting-A-Halloween-Party-Tonight gossiping. He tries to focus on the frankly excessive amount of denim Billy was wearing as he walked from his car to the school doors, but it doesn’t work. Steve isn’t so deep in denial that he can’t admit that Hargrove wears denim well.

Hargrove wears a lot of things well, Steve finds, such as dark leather or blood red. He also doesn’t wear things well. Specifically shirts. Steve finds it in himself to be thankful that Hargrove isn’t on the

swim team, because basketball tryouts are bad enough, but before long he has other things he needs to worry about.

Jonathan and Nancy don't bother showing up at Tina's party – they've never really found crowds and loud noise and shitty music enjoyable – but Steve, Tommy, and Carol drop by for an hour or two. It ends up being just like every other party they've been to, and the three of them get fed up pretty quickly. By the time it's ten o'clock, they're back at Steve's house, sitting by the pool despite the fact that it's cold out.

It's been almost a year since Barb disappeared, and the world's just gone on without her. Some days, Steve thinks that he, Nancy, Tommy, Carol, Jonathan, and Mr and Mrs Holland are the only ones who even remember that Barb ever existed.

"It's too quiet out here," Tommy says, leaning up on his elbows. Carol is lying sideways on the cold concrete beside him, an arm under her head.

"Do you guys ever wonder if the Demogorgons will come back?" she asks.

Steve shakes his head, looking across the pool at the diving board. "I try not to think about it. But it's been almost a year. Why would they come back now?"

"Maybe," Tommy says thoughtfully, "they've been biding their time."

"Maybe," Steve replies doubtfully. He shivers as the wind picks up and starts howling through the tree tops. "You guys ready to head inside?"

It turns out that Tommy is right: the Demogorgons have been biding their time. Steve doesn't know why, and he only finds out that they're still around when Dustin shows up at his house saying something about baby Demogorgons and girls.

"Why didn't you go to Mike's?" Steve asks Dustin as he grabs the old

nail bat and his keys.

"I did. He wasn't home, and neither was Nancy. I went to Lucas', too, but he wasn't there and Erica wouldn't tell me where he went."

"Nancy and Jonathan are out of town," Steve tells him. "I'm not sure what they're doing, but they weren't at school today, so it was probably important."

Dustin shrugs and gives Steve directions to his house. Steve doesn't bother reminding the kid that he's dropped him off after dinners at the Byers house, or that Hawkins is small enough that he's more than familiar with how to get from point A to point B.

When they get to Dustin's house, the kid bypasses the front door completely and leads Steve back to the storm cellar, which is locked. Steve knocks his bat against it gently and frowns at Dustin. "You better not be messing around with me," he says, and – once Dustin has unlocked the cellar – cautiously pulls the doors open. There are no sounds coming from below, but Dustin has backed away from the doors nervously, and it's his expectant gaze that prompts Steve to take the first step down into the cellar.

There's nothing hiding in the dark except slimy skin that Steve can't bring himself to touch, and a hole in the cellar wall. Somehow, the shed skin hanging off the nails on Steve's bat gives Dustin the bright idea to lure the Demodog – Dustin's name for the creature, not Steve's – someplace where they can dispose of it easily.

Steve finds himself calling Tommy and Carol, asking them to come to Dustin's house with large quantities of raw meat. While they wait, Dustin tries radioing Lucas again, with no luck.

Steve, Dustin, Tommy, and Carol walk side by side towards the junk yard, a trail of raw meat dogging their footsteps while Dustin regales the three of them with tales of Max, who is reportedly super cool; and Will, who freaked out on Halloween and, now that they're on the topic, has just been behaving really oddly ever since Hopper and Joyce carried him out of the Upside Down last year; and also Mike, who has been trying to use his walkie-talkie to talk to El even though she's gone...

Steve forgets, sometimes, that the kids don't know that El is alive; they always manage to remind him in the worst possible way, and he consistently feels like a piece of shit for hiding their friend from them afterwards.

By the time they've reached the junk yard, Dustin has jumped between enough topics that he's finally started pausing for a moment whenever he stops to take a breath. Lucas and Max – whose hair glows red underneath the cold light of the sun – show up not long after, and then the six of them are too busy lugging heavy pieces of metal around the junk yard and dumping gasoline over the remainder of the raw meat and the ground to talk much.

Dusk settles above them so quickly that Steve is almost surprised before he remembers that it's November, now. The temperature drops as darkness bleeds into the sky, save for the bright pinpricks of light that are scattered through the wispy clouds, and they slip quietly into the bus, where they huddle together by the windows for a few moments, shivering. Carol and Tommy climb the seats and hoist themselves through the emergency exit in the ceiling; the kids huddle in the back corner together, far away from the windows, though that doesn't stop them from leaning forward to watch through the windows for D'Art. Steve wishes he'd thought to send them away to somewhere safe, but it's too late now.

Already, the faint sounds of something growling and squelching and scrabbling across the ground is approaching, and a shiver creeps up Steve's spine. He can't blame it entirely on the cold.

D'Art bounds into view, and Steve hears Dustin hissing something indiscernible behind him; his words are lost to the sudden fear that floods through Steve's system as he grips his bat and steps out of the bus after handing Max his lighter; Tommy shouts something muffled when more Demodogs creep into the junk yard, surrounding them.

Everything is a blur after that; when the world clears up around him, Steve is aware of an ache in his fingers and in his shoulders that he assumes are from clenching and swinging the bat; and his throat is sore, as though he has been shouting, though what he'd been saying, he doesn't know; and the skin beneath his nose is itchy and tacky with blood when he rubs at it. But the Demodogs are backing away

slowly before they suddenly spring towards the lab and fade away into the darkness of the tree line.

Dustin and Lucas are unafraid of letting Steve know exactly how they feel about the way he's neglected to tell them about his powers and his past. By the time they've reached the lab, Steve has managed to tune them out, and rather than defending himself or his decisions he opts to exchange longsuffering glances with Tommy and Carol. Max, at least, has the sense to keep out of the lecture the boys give him, but even she cannot hide her intrigued glances when Lucas and Dustin finally allow Steve to describe what he's able to do.

They're not at the lab for long before Hopper comes tearing out the gates with a distraught Joyce, an unconscious Will, and an on-edge Mike in tow, but there is no sign of the Demodogs. The six of them and Nancy and Jonathan, who have finally showed up again, follow Hopper to the Byerses' house.

Everything goes to shit after that.

The kids hover over Will while Steve, Tommy, and Carol help Hopper, Joyce, Nancy, and Jonathan with a hasty remodeling of the Byerses' shed. For a few moments, it seems as though everything is going swimmingly; they've finally got the Morse *Close Gate* down from Will's message when the phone rings. Steve feels his heart leap into his throat even after Nancy slams the phone back on the hook; it's warranted, he thinks later, because barely two seconds pass before the phone rings again, and from there it's like a montage of photos that Jonathan might take:

Hopper and Joyce burst through the back door, Will looking ghostly pale where he lies limply, dead weight in their arms, their faces drawn tight with worry and fear.

Everyone draws together in a protective circle, their hands on whatever weapons they've managed to grab, staring warily out the windows, watching for any movement that might disrupt the eerie stillness of the trees.

Glass shatters as something crashes through a window and skids

across the floor; they all tense, afraid that a Demodog might have leapt through in a desperate attempt to get at them. But the body on the floor, undoubtedly a Demodog, is motionless that speaks of death, not fear.

The front door swings open, and a dark form stands there, framed by the woods and the night. El steps through, and they all breathe a sigh of shocked relief, even though her dark clothes and heavy makeup and slicked-back hair are more than a little shocking.

Of course, now that the truth is out there is the aftermath, and it is a furious thing that sweeps first over Mike's face, and then Dustin's and Lucas's; it crescendos, and though Steve cannot hear what Mike is shouting at Hopper, he can hear the sharp staccato of his rage, and the abrupt beginning and end of his unintelligible words.

El escapes Lucas and Dustin's clutches to melt into Steve's shadow. She slips her hand into his and tugs him down to whisper in his ear, "I visited Kali."

"How is she?" he can't help asking, even though the memory of their last meeting still stings.

El's lips pull down into a frown. "Angry." She seems to weigh something, and Steve doesn't know what it is, because the only other thing she tells him about her time with their sister is, "We found Papa. He is dead now."

He nods and tries not to read too far into her words; no matter how it came about, Brenner is gone, and he supposes he doesn't much care who, exactly, is responsible. It doesn't seem to weigh too heavily on El's mind, but he doesn't know her as well as he'd like to, even after a year.

El wanders off to find Mike a few moments later, and Steve listens, still a little shocked, as Joyce and Hopper start to make plans.

Hopper ends up pairing off with El on a suicide mission to the lab and the Gate. Joyce steps through the door with Nancy and Jonathan's armful of Will in tow; Tommy follows them, lugging two space heaters behind him.

He pokes his head through the doorway less than a minute later, asking for Steve's keys; he just barely manages to catch them before he's out the door again, and even in the darkness his form is visible as he jogs over to Will's bike, straddles it, and starts peddling down the driveway – Tommy's silhouette shifts from where it's hunched over the handlebars to a standing position; Tommy was always a faster biker than Steve, even on bikes meant for people several inches shorter than him, and he disappears in the direction of the Wheelers' house and Steve's car seamlessly. Tommy will be meeting the Byerses and Nancy at Hopper's cabin, Steve knows, with whatever firewood and heaters he can find. Meanwhile, Steve and Carol are stuck in the Byerses' kitchen, babysitting a sulky Mike, a restless Dustin, and Max and Lucas, who shift between besotted and conniving almost faster than Steve can blink.

Once they've shoved the Demodog into Ms Byers' fridge, he leaves the kids to their own devices, for the most part, and settles for talking to Carol while watching out of the corner of his eye as the four of them come together and start plotting, the expressions on their faces serious.

It is Mike who comes out with it: "We need to help them!"

"And how do you propose we do that?" Steve asks, amused.

Mike gestures significantly at the drawings crawling along the walls and floor. Steve has been doing his best to ignore them up to this point; the winding and crisscrossing strikes him as sinister and discomfiting. But now that Mike has pointed them out, Steve can't help looking at the veins creeping across every surface in the house. "We use the tunnels," Mike says, sounding as though he thinks that Steve is being particularly dense. "When we were in the lab, the Mind Flayer led a bunch of people into –" he wanders from room to room, searching for something "– this! And then a bunch of Demodogs attacked them. It's away from the Gate, and there's a hole a little ways away from the graveyard from when Hopper was exploring. We could go down there and set it on fire; it would lure the Demodogs away from the Gate, and then El would be able to close it easier!"

Steve frowns. "We're staying here. Our job is to stay out of the way until we're told otherwise. We're on the bench."

The kids scowl at him. “This isn’t one of your baseball games,” Dustin spits furiously. “This is real life. If we don’t do something to help them, El and Hopper might get hurt. Will might get hurt. They might die!”

“Do you think I don’t understand that?” Steve asks, fighting to stay calm. “Do you think I *like* sitting here, doing nothing, while my friends are out there risking their lives? El is as good as my sister! I don’t like leaving her out there on her own. But my job is to keep you guys safe, alright, because yeah, it’ll kill me if anything happens to any of them, but it’ll be worse if something happens to you guys on my watch!”

“Besides,” Carol says softly, and her unexpected interjection stifles the rising tide of the kids’ complaints and Steve’s increasingly futile defenses, “we don’t have a car. Even if it wasn’t a huge risk to everyone involved, we literally have no way of getting to the tunnels in order to help. We’re stranded here, and unless one of you can magic up a car *and* convince me and Steve that going to the tunnels is our best option, we’re staying here.

Of course, that’s when Hargrove shows up, gorgeous and simmering with rage as he steps out from the confines of his Camaro.

It’s Max’s wide eyes and frightened whispers that prompt Steve to leave the relative safety of the Byerses’ house; it’s the tension in her shoulders and the sudden drawn expressions that settle onto the other kids’ faces that have him approaching Hargrove and shivering in the November chill. It’s the wary glint in Carol’s eyes and the tightness in the boys’ shoulders that convince him to open his mouth and talk Hargrove into hearing them out.

Or maybe it’s his memory of how Hargrove was in basketball: aggressive and on edge, sharp and blunt, fast and strong; maybe it’s his recollection that Hargrove is in Nancy’s classes, and that means he’s *smart*; maybe it’s something other than the looks on the kids’ faces that have him talking to Hargrove with a little something extra in his voice.

Whatever it is, it gives him a bloody nose and a new ally and a car; it

gives him the courage to say, “You guys want to light up those tunnels? Then convince me.” He gives the kids a sharp smile before wiping the last traces of blood from his face. “Convince me, or I’ll convince you to stay.”

All told, he doesn’t take much convincing after all – it’s El out there; it’s Tommy and Hopper, Jonathan and Nancy, Ms Byers and Will. Steve might put on a good show, but Friday night dinners mean more than a night off from cooking: they mean *family*, and Steve’s family is out there right now. So it doesn’t take them much convincing once they’ve figured out where to hit him, but he was sort of counting on that.

Hargrove drives. He’s far more agreeable than he’s seemed at school and the Halloween party, and it’s not because of Steve’s charmspeak – all he’d had to do was persuade Hargrove to hear them out, and everything after that had fallen into place. He’s not sure how much the dead Demodog had to do with it. But Hargrove had heard them out and had melted into the background as they made their plans, and he’d volunteered to drive the lot of them out to the tunnels; Max’s face when he’d done so had been equal parts recognition and bewilderment.

So they get to the tunnels with little trouble, and dropping down into them is just as easy; it’s dark out, but they’re the scariest things wandering around right now. Steve guides everyone through the tunnels, and they snake through the slime – two kids between Steve and Carol, and two more behind her, with Hargrove bringing up the rear – and vines until they reach the so-called graveyard.

Carol douses the place with gasoline, and the scent is overwhelming even through the cloth over Steve’s mouth and nose. So far, they have gone undetected, but Steve doubts that their luck will hold much longer; he tosses his lighter at the soaked vines and leaps after the others, who are already backtracking towards the hole they’d dropped through.

The tunnels writhe around them with a disconcerting sentience, and Demodogs appear from nowhere, heading towards the blaze.

It is, of course, D’Art who gets in the way; Steve hates Demodogs and

their relatives with a passion, but even he is touched by Dustin's tearful farewell.

After D'Art, their way is clear. Steve boosts Hargrove up first, and he pulls the kids and Carol out before anchoring the rope enough for Steve to work his way up. Hargrove's hand clasps his and pulls; Steve struggles the rest of the way out of the shrinking opening and collapses beside Hargrove.

They lie on the ground, side by side, laughing off the adrenaline. Their hands are still clasped, and their fingers have tangled together, but it is not until Carol threatens to leave without them that they let go of each other.

Somehow, Steve has managed to land himself Dustin duty. He doesn't mind, really; Dustin is probably his favorite kid after El, though Steve will never say so out loud. But he's on Dustin duty, which currently includes reassuring the kid about his hair and suit. It sucks, a little bit: it's Friday, but instead of everyone getting together for dinner, the kids've got their Snow Ball, and Carol and Tommy are helping Nancy and Jonathan chaperone.

Joyce and Hopper have decided to take advantage of the lack of children – Hopper has decided to allow El out of the house, for once, and she's getting dropped off with Max – to visit Bob's grave.

Steve resigns himself to a lonely evening; he slumps down in his seat and stares out the window and into the gymnasium; every now and then, he catches a glimpse of his friends, and he can't hold back a fond smile when he sees Nancy and Dustin dancing together. They've all come a long way.

The passenger side door opens, and Billy slips inside.

"Your old man's letting you stay out?" Steve asks, surprised.

"Neil's gone," Billy shrugs. "He's got no say over what I do anymore."

Steve's eyebrows arch in astonishment. "What?"

"Susan made 'im leave," Billy tells him, a smile fighting to escape the

corner of his mouth. “And apparently Doc Owens has destroyed all the remaining information about the Upside Down. He seems pretty confident that no one’ll ever be able to open it again. Pretty good Christmas present if you ask me.”

“No kidding.” Steve grins and breathes out: “You know what that means?”

“No more monsters,” Billy replies, his smile finally breaking free; he looks happier than Steve has ever seen him, but Steve supposes that sort of thing happens when a person’s personal monsters are just as gone as the supernatural ones.

“Thank god,” Steve says, returning Billy’s grin. He shifts in his seat and leans over the center consol. Billy meets him halfway, wraps his arms around Steve’s neck, and only pulls back when their smiles get in the way of the kiss.

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, that was the last chapter! I hope you all enjoyed it, and thanks for sticking with me!!!